

e-FICTIONS

SEIKAISSHA ☆

ダガンロンパ 秘切

DANGANRONPA

KIRIGIRI

4

北山猛邦

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Illustration

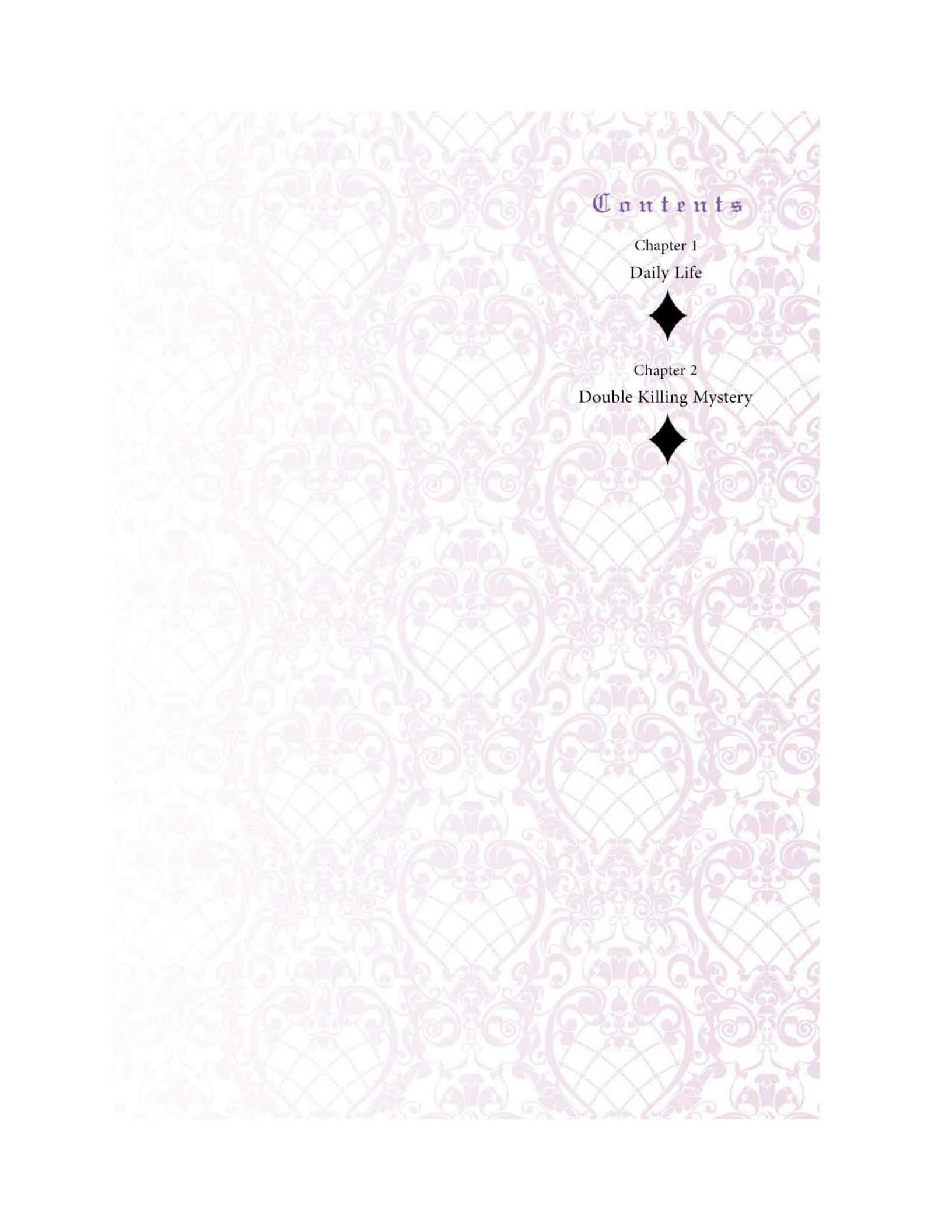
小松崎類

Komatsuzaki Rui









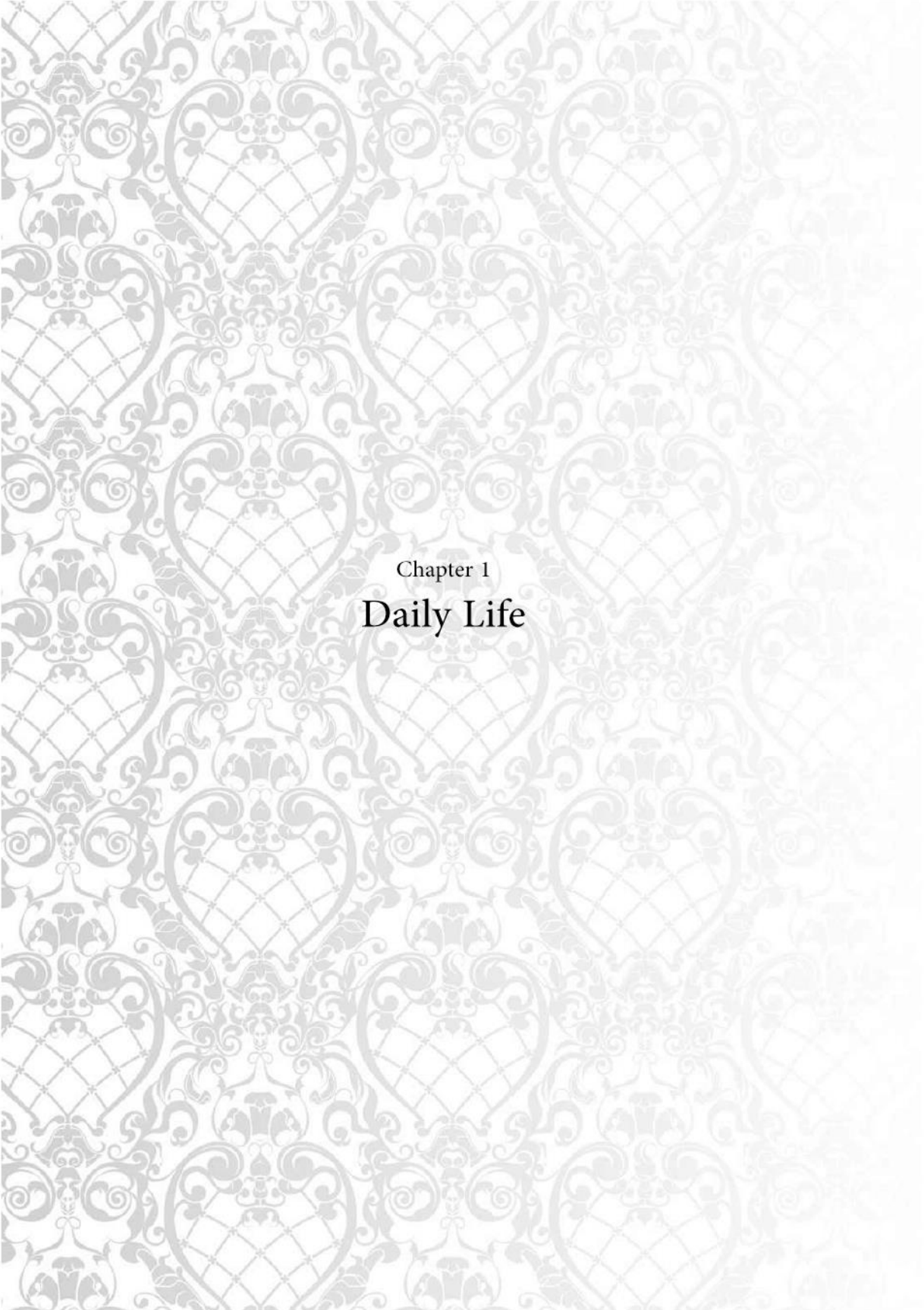
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Chapter 1

Daily Life

If he is the kind of person who can still smile when talking about his past, I probably won't forgive him.

—Are you going to meet her?

—I don't have the face for that.

He shrugged as he said this, his face looked so preoccupied that I didn't know what to say. An outsider like me shouldn't be able to argue about what happened between them, especially since it's a domestic matter...

From the time we met to the time we parted, he never identified himself, and even wanted me to act as if I had never seen him. To make an analogy, we were like two travelers who happened to pass by each other in some distant corner of the world, destined to walk away from each other five minutes later. He wanted our connection to stop there, and the circumstances at the time didn't allow me to inquire about his identity.

But I knew anyway.

He is Kirigiri Kyōko's father.

I know that he had left his daughter and the Kirigiri family 6 years ago. I know that he was born into a family that inherited the bloodline of generations of detectives, but he didn't want to be a detective. I also know that he is now a teacher at the Hope's Peak Academy.

I recalled the conversation between us when he was driving me to the dormitory.

"There aren't many people who can outwit Kirigiri Kyōko."

As he drove, he squinted his eyes that resembled Kirigiri Kyōko while driving. He was wearing a high-end suit, his tie was slightly loosened, and his collar was open, showing his character.

"I'm not exactly ignorant about that."

He looked straight ahead and said.

The car traversed the uneventful streets at a very ordinary speed, and we blended into the everyday scenery without the slightest disharmony.

"Shinsen Mikado—"

The moment I blurted out the name, he turned his eyes to me in the passenger seat.

But his gaze quickly shifted back to the front.

"It really was him, wasn't it? Please tell me, what is the relationship between the Kirigiri family and Shinsen Mikado?"

"There are some things in this world that you are better off not knowing. The truth isn't always helpful to you." He said so, and then immediately continued: "But... your eyes tell me that you aren't too impressed with this kind of platitude.."

"Please tell me."

I said it again, and he sighed in dilemma.

"Before that, tell me about your experience, and what led you to that mansion."

"Okay."

I told the whole story from the time I met Kirigiri Kyōko until I found the body of Kirigiri's grandfather. I got acquainted with her because of the 'Sirius Observatory' murder case. We then met Shinsen in the 'Norman's Hotel' case. We are now confronting the Crime Victims' Relief Committee with Shinsen as the chairman, and I went to the mansion to confirm a fact related to Kirigiri's grandfather.

I encountered a very serious situation in the mansion. Kirigiri's 'grandfather' was brutally murdered a few months ago, and his body was buried in the courtyard. In other words, when I first met Kirigiri, her 'grandfather' had already passed away.

So who was the 'grandfather' she introduced to me...

"Kirigiri-chan told me that her grandfather was a detective, and I did meet him. But then I felt— that **something was wrong**, the '*grandfather*' that I had in mind wasn't the same as the '*grandfather*' that Kirigiri-chan described. Looking back, there were indeed many things that didn't match up. The 'grandfather' opposed the DSC numbering system, yet he had Kirigiri-chan register in the Detective Library. The 'grandfather' who should've been abroad had appeared in the mansion... I should have given more thought to these contradictions."

My incompetence made me feel the urge to cry. I clenched my hand on my leg into a fist, suppressing my emotions.

"Kirigiri-chan... She gets very reluctant to talk once the topic involves herself, especially about her family situation. She even has a tendency to avoid mentioning it entirely, but I think she has no intention to deceive me, It was simply a misunderstanding on my part..."

"it's a bad habit of hers. She always feels that other people's 'understanding' is the same as her own."

He said with a frown.

Kirigiri Kyōko must've always been a very intelligent person, and in the world through her eyes, both the speed of the passage of time and the sights she sees are different from mine, which is why there is a discrepancy between us.

What is the world like through her eyes? That's something that an ordinary person like me can never see.

However, she still opened up her world to me with a positive attitude, otherwise she wouldn't have let me meet her 'grandfather'.

What she tried to show me despite her shyness was perhaps her ideal daily life. To her, detective work *is* daily life, and perhaps this is the most unusual.

However— even this little extravagant hope was an illusion that Shinsen had forged in advance.

And I failed to notice it.

"In conclusion... **there are two grandfathers**. But there's nothing strange about that... because generally everyone has two grandfathers, **a paternal grandfather and a maternal grandfather**. The 'grandfather' of the Kirigiri family who inherited the detective's bloodline should be the paternal one, while the 'grandfather' who owned a large mansion on the hill and lives with Kirigiri Kyōko after she returned home is the maternal one. In hindsight, Kirigiri-chan made a distinction between the two of them when she mentioned them, but I focused entirely on the grandfather who is a detective and kept mixing them up."

"Can't blame you, she's the one who didn't explain it clearly."

The man who drove said sympathetically.

"Kirigiri-chan said that she lived abroad for almost 5 years, and only returned to the country about two and a half months ago—that is, she only spent such a short time with her maternal grandfather, so even Kirigiri-chan didn't notice that her 'grandfather' had been swapped out. It looks like that at the time around Christmas, she probably didn't realize that he was impersonated by Shinsen."

What's more, Shinsen is also a Variationist detective who is known for his disguise and camouflage. With his superb skills, it's enough to fool even a relative. Since the target is Kirigiri Kyōko, the 5-year gap was just what he needed to take advantage of.

"On New Year's Day, the one who called to warn us to be careful of Shinsen must've been the paternal grandfather, that is, Kirigiri Fuhito-san himself. I really regret not asking him at that time."

The grandfather's warning had no effect at all, we still met with Shinsen Mikado. Maybe that wasn't accidental, everything was arranged in advance.

Shinsen's plan had already begun before Kirigiri Kyōko returned to the country. For some reason, he disguised himself into Kirigiri's maternal grandfather, and infiltrated the mansion, presumably those 'servants' are also his henchmen.

"At first, I thought it was just a misunderstanding, but after I found that Kirigiri-chan didn't look right, I began to feel that what happened in the mansion wasn't so simple. So to find out the truth, I went to the mansion. What happened afterwards... You know all about it."

After I sneaked into the mansion, a 'servant' appeared in front of me and attacked me. The one who rescued me from the servant was the man in the driver's seat.

"The one buried in the courtyard is the real maternal 'grandfather', I think Kirigiri-chan found it when she returned to the mansion after the Norman's Hotel case. It's possible that she had vaguely noticed something unusual about her 'grandfather' before. And after learning about Shinsen's existence, her suspicion became certain, and thus discovered the body buried in the courtyard."

The only relative she could rely on was fake. The real 'grandfather' had already been killed. When I think of her feelings when she learned the truth, I can't help but feel heartbroken. The detectives of the Kirigiri family have always been taught to put their detective work before the death of their relatives, but was Kirigiri Kyōko completely unfazed at that time?

"Then she went into hiding, and I guess she decided to prioritize her own personal safety. However, a few days later, she came back to me because she found out that I could be in danger. She actually could've left me all alone, and had every option to go abroad to Kirigiri Fuhito-san, yet she still..."

"She made up her mind to face it courageously, huh?" said the person in the driver's seat, his expression finally easing slightly. "Don't worry, she is a detective of the Kirigiri family."

"But... she's just a 13-year-old girl."

I spoke in a tone that unconsciously took on an element of blame.

I know I have no right to blame him, but I still couldn't help but say that. As a father, if he had picked up Kirigiri Kyōko when she returned home, maybe things wouldn't have turned out like this. Or, if he didn't run away from home, if he had inherited the detective work... Although I know very well in my heart that talking about hypotheticals doesn't help much...

"—13 years old already." he said to himself. "She chose the way of the **Shura** since she was a child. On that path, murder and betrayal are commonplace. From the time she walked this path,

she should have known that no one will understand her in the future. However—"

He seemed to want to say something, but he stopped talking.

He looked as if he had come back to his senses all of a sudden, snapping out of it and realizing that he had already said too much.

"Anyway, as far as the result is concerned, it wasn't a bad thing that you misunderstood her grandfathers' situation. If you noticed something abnormal in that mansion earlier, perhaps you would have been gotten rid of by now."

"Gotten rid of..."

"Besides, thanks to you, I was able to get a rough idea of what was going on in that mansion, thanks a lot." He simply thanked me, and then continued: "You surmised correctly. The one buried in the courtyard is Kirigiri Kyōko's maternal grandfather, his name was Tōhachirō Uzuchi, he was a talented old man who had high ranks in the 8 fields of Karate, Kendō, Jūdō, Kyūdō, Aikidō, Iaidō, Naginata, and Shodō, and was also a loyal supporter of the Kirigiri family."

When I saw him on Christmas, he said something similar to the Kirigiri family motto. Although that person was undoubtedly Shinsen in disguise, the real Tōhachirō-san probably used to say the same in the past, at least Kirigiri Kyōko didn't have the slightest doubt about his words and actions.

As I imagine it— Tōhachirō-san should have had a certain degree of respect for the Kirigiri family during his lifetime, and he also had

high hopes for his granddaughter. His old eyes, honed with his training, allowed him to see a bright future for Kirigiri Kyōko.

The self-defense techniques that Kirigiri Kyōko learned might have been taught to her by Tōhachirō-san. The actions Shinsen used when he faked his identity should have imitated Tōhachirō-san's style. The man sitting in the driver's seat seems to have the same martial arts. Perhaps he practiced self-defense in the past when he was learning detective skills.

"Let's talk about Shinsen Mikado."

The man in the driver's seat said suddenly.

The car isn't far from my dormitory.

There is not much time left.

"About what he really is— In a sense, he is like a black hole. If Kirigiri Kyōko is a bright white star, then Shinsen Mikado is a dark star. invisible with the naked eye and capable of distorting the light around him."

Dark Star—

What we are dealing with is an immense, incomparably dark, elusive existence.

"Regarding the time and place of his birth... the answer is surprisingly ordinary, almost not worth mentioning. On some winter day, somewhere in this country, the third son of an ordinary family was born, even you can also easily find his birth record. However, this may also be a fact that he had forged.

Therefore, I will tell you in advance that even if you want to investigate more information about him, it will only be in vain."

"When did Shinsen start his detective work?"

"According to what is left in the official records, he was involved in the investigation of some cases and dedicated to solving them when he was at least 10 years old."

People who can stand at the apex in this world surely emerge from an early age, just like athletes participating in the Olympic Games, the detective's talent always reveals itself in childhood.

In my point of view, it's simply a superhuman ability, but Kirigiri Kyōko was already working with his grandfather at that age. When Mikagami Rei was 9 years old, he was already at the Triple-Zero rank. It feels really unattainable to me.

"However, compared with other great detectives, he belongs to the unremarkable type. Those who are known as **ultimate detectives** are people who don't conform to common sense, but he was a very ordinary, reasonable person. Rather, he was a young man who was overly concerned with straightforward arguments, in a good sense, he was earnest, but in a bad sense, he was inflexible. When you're a detective, you're bound to see the dirty side of human nature and the unreasonableness of the world, but he couldn't turn a blind eye or turn away from it."

I can probably understand this kind of thinking. I think at least I have this tendency myself.

But I won't try to understand him, nor do I want to. Why should I understand what the leader of a criminal organization thinks.

"In the course of his work as a detective, he befriended a detective named Kirigiri Fuhito, that wasn't accidental, but a necessity. Soon, they began to work together."

"Kirigiri Fuhito-san and Shinsen Mikado were originally partners?"

"Yes, they were partners, close friends, a pair of mentor and disciple."

A team of an excellent young detective and an experienced senior detective.

This description would make anyone feel that they were an invincible pair.

However, this team ended up disbanding, with one of them having a granddaughter who became a detective, and the other became an enemy.

What a tragic fate.

"15 years ago, when the Detective Library was established, Kirigiri Fuhito and Shinsen were both on the list of founders. But I heard that Fuhito-san himself didn't register in the Detective Library, and he opposed the introduction of the DSC numbering system, is this where the root of their differences arose?"

"No, that's not the case, that was just a trivial matter. The reason the two of them parted ways is—"

The car pulled onto a familiar road.

A little further and I will be able to see my dormitory.

Sitting in the driver's seat, his lips were tightly closed, as if he found it difficult to speak.

I urged him to continue:

"The reason is?"

"It should be Kirigiri Kyōko."

".....Eh?"

"The Kirigiri family has been in the detective business for generations. However, as of 15 years ago, Kirigiri Fuhito had no heir. He had one son, but that son had rejected the detective work and left home."

"I heard from Kirigiri-chan."

"If this is the case, things couldn't be more obvious, right? Simply put, Fuhito couldn't wait for an heir, **so he chose a talented young man as his partner, provided that this young man will inherit his name in the future.**"

"Shinsen Mikado... *inheriting the Kirigiri name?*"

"Yes, Fuhito admitted that Shinsen had the talent to carry his name. It's rare for a disciple of a famous detective, or a person who carries on the legacy of a famous detective, to inherit the name."

"But... in the end, Shinsen Mikado took a different path."

"That's right, Shinsen didn't inherit the Kirigiri name, **because after the birth of Kirigiri Kyōko, the Kirigiri bloodline must be given priority**. I don't know if it's for this reason... but after that, Shinsen disappeared from Kirigiri Fuhito's sight. Only they themselves know what really happened between them."

Could it be that the reason why he was so obsessed with the Kirigiri family was because the name he should have inherited was taken away by Kirigiri Kyōko?

Was his purpose... *to take the Kirigiri name?*

Just for this, he commanded a huge criminal organization to kill countless people, and even pursued Kirigiri-chan. For a person like me whose background has nothing to do with prestige, his behavior is simply crazy.

What does the name 'Kirigiri' really mean to them?

What is a detective to them?

Kirigiri Kyōko once said that for her, living and being a detective are the same thing, and now I can somewhat understand the meaning of this statement. This has nothing to do with her own will, it's simply a curse carried by her bloodline.

Before I knew it, the car stopped on the edge of the driveway.

I can see my school from the window. The entrance of the school is in front of me, and the dormitory is behind the gates.

The man in the driver's seat waited for me to open the door and get out of the car.

But I'm not relenting.

"Have you seen Shinsen's true face?"

I asked, and he shook his head silently.

Then again, I wonder if he's ever met with Shinsen in person.

Kirigiri Fuhito and Shinsen were partners before Kirigiri was born, so it's not surprising that he hadn't met Shinsen since he had left his parents' home. So did he do his own research on Shinsen, or—

"So, go ahead."

He urged me.

My hand reaching for the car door suddenly retracted.

"Can I ask one last question?"

"What is it?"

"You are not Shinsen Mikado, are you?"

I don't think so, but—

Shinsen could do it. If the man in the driver's seat is Kirigiri Kyōko's father, would it be too much of a stretch for him to show up in that mansion at that moment? Is he Shinsen pretending to be Kirigiri's father? The story so far could've been told from Shinsen's point of view. There may be some lies mixed in.

The man in the driver's seat was still facing forward, and he tilted his head as if he was choosing his words.

"I apologize if I gave you the wrong impression." a wry smile appeared at the corner of his mouth. "Whoever I am, I'm going to let you go. Isn't that enough of an answer?"

"What were you doing in that mansion?"

"I don't have to answer you."

"No, please answer this question. Your answer will determine whether I'm going to arrest you here or not. If you are Shinsen—then this is a good opportunity to end the game."

I pushed up my glasses and prepared myself.

That said, I don't have anything on me that can serve as a weapon. Whether he is Shinsen or Kirigiri's father, if he really attacks me, he would have me pinned down in an instant. The only advantage for me is that this is a public street.

The man in the driver's seat thought for a while, resting both arms on the steering wheel and gazing at the fingertips that were clasped together.

Finally he shook his head slightly, looking helpless.

"I don't have a place to go back to, and now I can't even guarantee my freedom to leave for good. It's a tough workplace... Every time I get promoted, the background checks get stricter. Even if that's disregarded, my family is **a bit unique**, and that doesn't sit well with the council members...."

He was talking to himself, reaching into the inner pocket of his suit.

I held my breath.

Is he going to take out a weapon?

I involuntarily stretched my hand to the door handle.

"Look at this and you will understand."

A moment later, something flashed at his chest—

It's a photograph.

In the center of the photo is a smiling Kirigiri Kyōko. She looks much younger than she is now, with a carefree smile on her face as a man who should be her father is picking her up with both hands.

I have never seen her look like this before, it represents complete trust in a person.

"So cute....."

I wanted to take a closer look at the photo, but he immediately hid it back.

"I may never see her again. That's the kind of place I'll be going to in the future. So before I go, I thought I'd revisit some old memories— that's all."

He wouldn't meet my eyes, he still looked at the front of the driveway and said.

I stole a glance at the folder stuck in the side pocket of the car door, which had the school emblem of Hope's Peak Academy printed on it. It's an academy with government privileges, and it's

said that Kirigiri Kyōko's father is teaching there. Since many people in important positions came from that academy, the academy's secrecy must be very strict.

He followed his own path with a certain determination, but I wonder if it was worth the separation from his family. It's just that, at least I don't suspect him anymore, after seeing a picture like that, there's no room for suspicion at all.

"Sorry, I've been probing too much."

I bowed my head deeply.

Then sincerely opened the door and got out of the car.

Before closing the door, I said to the inside of the car:

"Umm... although I know it's unlikely... can I ask for your help, since you don't hold a grudge against the Kirigiri family, nor do you dislike her..."

"No." he answered immediately. "—To be precise, it's not my turn to step in. As a detective, she's better than me."

"You have no objection to Kirigiri-chan continuing as a detective?"

"Of course." he turned his face towards me for the first time. "She is talented, and she also has the Kirigiri family as a home, so that's fine. If she loses her home, that's when I'll come in."

"But... the one who can save her now..."

"You are there for her." he smiled softly. "It's great for her to have friends like you. I hope you'll be there for her in the future."

These words made me feel that my hard work has finally paid off.

Although many times, I often hate my incompetence for not being able to help her.

Is someone like me qualified to be by her side.

I lowered my head once again so that the man wouldn't see the tears that are welling up in my eyes.

"Leave it to me to deal with the Tōhachirō side of the family. I will still report to the police. However, since Shinsen is related to this matter, the police will probably not conduct a formal investigation. Then... don't mind me saying again, don't tell anyone that you've met me, and certainly not her, okay?"

"Okay."

I closed the door and walked away from the car.

The car went back into traffic without making any particular gesture of goodbye.

Maybe I won't meet that man again.

This parting gave me such a feeling.

According to Kirigiri Kyōko, he's supposed to be a cruel man who left his only daughter and ran away from the family, but after meeting him, my impression of him has changed drastically.

Behind his sensible, worried expression of a philosopher, there is a calm and gentle character. Perhaps someone like him is indeed not suitable to be a detective of the Kirigiri family.

He was born in this world where everything is based on talent, but he wasn't recognized and lost his 'home'. It's precisely because he is such a person that he dedicated his life to Hope's Peak Academy. After all, it's an institution that nurtures talented children, and it's also 'home' —

However, no matter what the inside story is, in this case, he still insists on keeping his distance from Kirigiri Kyōko. This attitude makes me inexplicably anxious. Is the gap between them really that deep? Or is it because he has the utmost trust in Kirigiri Kyōko, who is a detective, that he doesn't think he needs to interfere.

No matter how talented a detective she is, her body is immature and her heart is still young.

The pride and curse carried by the Kirigiri name is all borne by her alone. For such a person, is it possible to be rewarded for her hard work...

"Yui-onēsama?"

Kirigiri turned her head and stared at me.

It was my dorm room in the dormitory.

She's sitting on the bed, using her fingers to comb through her hair.

"Ah, yeah?" I came back to my senses all at once. "What's wrong, Kirigiri-chan?"

"The other side."

She is making sure that I braid both sides of her hair.

I braided her hair as she asked me to.

"Yui-onēsama, your eyes are so red." she said with her back to me. "Tired?"

"Nah— it's okay." I wiped my eyes and carefully braided Kirigiri's hair. "What about you, Kirigiri-chan, have you rested?"

"Yes, well rested."

It feels like she's still trying to be brave, but her voice had regained a lot of energy.

She carries the pain of losing her loved ones and the remorse of those crime victims on this small back. Can I relieve her burden a little?

"Speaking of which, Yui-onēsama, where have you been?"

"Ah... umm... it's research, research!"

"Researching what?"

"Researching Shinsen." I said while braiding. "I thought that since he was a former Triple-Zero rank detective, his name should be in the reports of related cases... so I checked it out on the Internet."

"And the results?"

"Hmm... There were few pieces of information about the founders of the Detective Library. It's rumored that one of the young detectives, at the age of 10, was able to solve cases... I think that might be Shinsen... I wonder if that's the case."

I spoke incoherently, racking my brains to think about what to say next. If I go on, I might accidentally leak what has been said in the car.

"No reference value."

Kirigiri frowned and glanced at me.

This expression is exactly the same as that man.

"Sorry..." I braided her hair, and finally tied the ribbon. "There you go."

"Thanks."

Kirigiri happily stroked her hair and said.

"You're welcome, princess. Now what, what should we do next? There's still plenty of time, but we can't be too slow, there are still five challenges left."

24 hours have passed since the start of this 'Black Challenge'.

There are 144 hours left.

'Black Challenge' is a crime game organized by the Crime Victims' Relief Committee. The perpetrator of the crime, using the criminal methods provided by the committee must kill all the targets within the time limit of 168 hours, and shouldn't be discovered by the detective, and in turn, the detective win if they can point out the perpetrator.

This time the challenge letters were directly handed to me by Ryūzōji Gekka. He is a Triple-Zero rank detective and an executive of the Crime Victims' Relief Committee.

There were a total of twelve challenge letters.

This is a method that Ryūzōji, who is known as the genius of parallel thinking and multitasking, came up with.

As long as all cases are solved within the time limit, Ryūzōji will admit defeat and resign from the Crime Victims' Relief Committee; even if I fail to solve the cases, there will be no punishment. Having said that, this is a matter of life and death, and I cannot neglect that part.

I wonder why Ryūzōji Gekka, who is highly respected by detectives and police, chose someone like me as his challenger. It could be to draw out Kirigiri Kyōko, who had disappeared without a trace, or to reveal the true identity of another Triple-Zero rank detective, Mikagami Rei. Of course, these answers aren't the only ones. They overlap with each other, intertwine, and coexist at the same time. This is how Ryūzōji operates.

All in all, one of the cases was solved yesterday, and Kirigiri made great a contribution. At the same time, Licorne, who is assisting us, also known as Mikagami Rei, solved five cases in an instant.

This makes half of the twelve cases solved.

There are six left.

Among them, Kirigiri and I are in charge of five of them, and the remaining one is already under investigation by Licorne.

I lined up the five unsolved challenges.

*A message to the detective
Listen to the cry of the black*

Location:	"Goodbye" Bar	20 million
Murder Weapon:	Pocket Knife	5 million
Murder weapon:	Charybdoxin	30 million
Murder Weapon:	Rope	3 million
Technique:	Locked Room	20 million

Total expenditure: 78 million

Based on the above expenses, summon the following detective:

Samidare Yui

*A message to the detective
Listen to the cry of the black*

Location:	Museum of Medieval Western Europe Torture Devices	30 million
Murder Weapon:	Iron Maiden	30 million
Technique:	Locked Room	80 million

Total expenditure: 140 million

Based on the above expenses, summon the following detective:

Samidare Yui

*A message to the detective
Listen to the cry of the black*

Location:	Kareobana Academy	30 million
Murder Weapon:	Candle	20 million
Technique:	Locked Room	150 million
Total expenditure:		200 million

Based on the above expenses, summon the following detective:

Samidare Yui

*A message to the detective
Listen to the cry of the black*

Location:	Libra Girls' Academy	200 million
Murder Weapon:	Iron Pipe	3 million
Technique:	Locked Room	150 million
Total expenditure:		353 million

Based on the above expenses, summon the following detective:

Samidare Yui

*A message to the detective
Listen to the cry of the black*

Location:	Twins Ability Development Institute	50 million
Murder Weapon:	Pocket Knife	5 million
Technique:	The Ultimate Locked Room	500 million

Miscellaneous:	Chains	3 million
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Miscellaneous:	Padlocks	3 million
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Total expenditure: 165 million

Based on the above expenses, summon the following detective:

Samidare Yui

"When you line them up like this, the case under 100 million yen looks cute. Still, I'm sure it won't be easy."

The greater the expenses written in the challenge letter, the more difficult the case will be.

The expenses of the case solved yesterday were 151 million. To be honest, I definitely wouldn't have been able to handle that alone, but it took Kirigiri one night to solve it. As a result, I still had to rely on Kirigiri's brain.

"No matter how you think about it, Ryūzōji-san overestimated my strength."

"Is that so."

Kyoko said indifferently.

"Because the previous cases were almost solved by Kirigiri-chan... A Triple-Zero detective and I are just not a match for each other."

This 'Black Challenge' is to a large extent a proxy war between two Triple-Zero rank detectives. The perpetrators of each case, and even me as a detective, are nothing but pawns who have been exploited and affected by this war.

"That's not the case. It's because Yui-onēsama didn't lose her fighting spirit that I'm fighting alongside you. If there is a reason why Ryūzōji Gekka is wary of you, I think it's because of this."

—Because it takes courage to run away.

I didn't say that, and swallowed it back into my stomach.

I can't always just say some demoralizing words, Kirigiri's situation is much more difficult than mine, even for her sake, I have to fight to the end. I should still be able to protect her from those who want to hurt her.

"Yeah, let's keep moving forward, even if it's just a little bit."

"That's what Yui-onēsama would say."

"Okay, which challenge letter should we start with next?"

I picked up the five challenge letters and compared them with each other.

Should it be done from the low-cost or the closest location approach—

"Before that, there is a place we have to go to."

"Eh, where?"

I was a little confused.

Kirigiri stood up and opened the room door.

She is wearing her uniform as usual, and seemed to be ready.

"W-wait a sec." I hurriedly put on my backpack. "Where are you going? Hey?"

We left the dormitory and stopped a taxi at the school gate.

At Kirigiri's urging, I got into the back seat.

"To Meyura Station."

Kirigiri told the driver.

Speaking of Meyura Station, that was the place where the battle for Mikagami Rei took place yesterday afternoon, and several people died in the process. The on-site investigations shouldn't be over yet. I don't want to go near there if I can. I wonder what she is going there for.

Although there are many questions I wanted to ask, I didn't say anything until the station. Since Kirigiri must go there at the expense of precious time, it must be meaningful.

We got off at the station.

There are still many people. The young men and women shopping together and the white-collar workers in suits coming and going in a hurry, as if the tragic incident that happened in the department store in the station building had happened years ago. At first glance, I didn't see any relevant personnel conducting on-site investigations, and I couldn't help but breathe a sigh of relief.

Kirigiri took me by the hand and led me to a place that looked familiar.

A monument in the shape of a snowflake appeared in my field of vision.

This place is often used by people to go on dates. Some people are scattered in the cold wind, some are standing still, and some are talking on their mobile phones.

Among them is a man I know.

He has a rīzento and wearing a Hawaiian shirt, squatting in front of the monument.

Probably because of that special aura of his, people stayed away, leaving a circle empty around him.

"Yo, little detectives!"

He saw us and immediately stood up, yelling while waving a hand.

Yaki Hajiki DSC number [666]

The eyes of the people around were all focused.

"W-wait... what's going on? Why are you here?"

"What's the matter? You girls asked me to come here, didn't you say you needed help?" Yaki grinned and pointed at himself with his thumb. "In that case, you can leave it to me."

One of the twelve 'Black Challenges' was the Takeda Haunted Mansion case. In that case, several detectives were called to the scene, and he was one of them. He was involved in the case both as an eyewitness and as a suspect.

"I was the one who called him."

Kirigiri took out a phone from her jacket pocket and returned it to me. That's the phone lent to me by Ryūzōji Gekka. It seems that she used this to call Yaki. When did she even get Yaki's number?

"I heard you girls are having a headache dealing with some bad guys? Well, now that I'm here, you don't have to worry anymore. What kind of rascals are we dealing with?"

"It's indeed a headache..."

"The range of information that we have access to depends largely on Lico's help, in order to make up for this deficiency we also need more people, but this isn't to say that I don't trust him. Also I've been in touch with Mizuiyama-san and Yadorigi-san."

"Right! They were treated as criminal suspects in the previous case, so there's no need to worry about if they're members of the Crime Victims' Relief Committee!"

"But it's only a little better than choosing detectives we don't know at the Detective Library."

"But..." I whispered to Kirigiri's ears. "This person isn't Shinsen, right?"

"Hey hey, what're you two whispering about." Yaki intervened between us in a surprise. "What do you mean I'm not **young**? I'm still 28 years old, you know? It won't look inappropriate even if I dated highschoolers."

I didn't even listen to what he said, and just squinted my eyes to observe him carefully. He doesn't look like he is wearing a masquerade mask, and there is nothing unnatural about his body. The Shinsen I know looked a little thinner overall.

"—Now, what do you want me to do?"

"Wait until everyone is here."

"The appointed time has already passed."

"Wait another 10 minutes, we will leave if no one comes."

Kirigiri stood with her back to the monument, seemingly observing the people coming and going on the street, I also followed her example. Yaki squatted down and held an unlit cigarette in his mouth.

Within the 10 minutes, the people waiting around us were also coming and going non-stop, it felt like only Kirigiri and me were excluded by the passing time. If only this is the case—

After waiting for 10 minutes, no one came.

"They're scared, aren't they?" Yaki stood up with his fingers twirling his cigarette nimbly. "It's okay, I'll take care of it myself, don't worry."

"Kirigiri-chan, what should we do?"

"I never thought that everyone would come. Of course, what happened yesterday might have made them more vigilant. We shouldn't waste more time, let's go."

"For the time being, let's find a place to have a cup of tea, phew... so cold."

Yaki said, as he curled up. I wanted to ask him to change his clothes first, but I didn't say anything.

We walked towards the station building.

At that moment, a car horn sounded behind us, and when we looked back, there was a gray high-end imported car parked on the road opposite the monument.

The window of the driver's seat rolled down, revealing a familiar face.

A man in a suit, with looks of western origin and dark sunglasses. He is most likely...

Salvador Yadorigi Fukurō DSC number [752]

"I am sorry to keep you waiting for so long, there was a traffic jam on the road."

We walked over to him and he gave us a slight nod of greeting from the driver's seat on the left-hand side. He has a bit of a foreign accent, but he still speaks Japanese fluently.

"You should've taken the train when meeting us at the train station. Are you stupid or something?"

Yaki glared at him with a vicious, aggressive look.

However, Yadorigi still had a gentle smile on his face, and he tilted his head slightly, making light of Yaki's words.

"Where are you all going? Please let me give you a ride if I may."

"Anywhere is fine as long as we can talk about secret topics a bit."

Kirigiri said as she brushed her hair that was resting on her face.

"Then let us talk about it in the car, we might as well go for a ride while talking. Please get in."

Kirigiri opened the door of the back seat without hesitation and got into the car, and I planned to follow her in.

"Wait a minute!"

A female voice halted me.

A petite woman in a kimono approached us through the crowd. She has a bob haircut like a traditional doll, wears glasses, and for some reason is holding binoculars in her right hand.

"Please allow me to join."

Mizuiyama Sachi DSC number [527]

"You're here!"

I was overjoyed and greeted her with a smile on my face. She is also one of the detectives we met during the Takeda Haunted Mansion case, so everyone is here now.

However, Mizuiyama's expression is by no means calm, it looks rather like she is angry.

"Thanks a lot for last night." she nodded to us stiffly. "The police quickly explained the reason to me and then released me, but I will never forget the shame of being treated as a murderer. Even if it was to force out the real murderer, you shouldn't have accused me of murder..."

In the last case, according to the plan of the real murderer, she was regarded as the murderer. However, Kirigiri planned to deliberately say that she was the murderer, she must've been scared to death at that time.

"Alright, alright, do not be so angry. If it were not for Kirigiri-san, you might really have been arrested as the murderer." Yadorigi intervened and said with a smile. "The bottom line is that it is a waste for a beautiful woman like you to make such a scary face. Come on, no one is sitting in the passenger seat, please get in."

"I will only listen to you."

Mizuiyama blushed and sat in the passenger seat obediently. For some reason, she took off her zōri and sat on the cushion upright on her knees.

Yaki and I also got into the car.

The car started to move forward.

This vehicle carried five detectives into the traffic of the avenue.

"Really, I thought I'm only one who would come. You guys aren't young anymore, yet you still don't know how to keep your appointments."

Yaki said as he leaned his body into the front row from the back seat.

"I arrived before all of you."

"Huh?"

"I was watching the scene from a distance." Mizuiyama flashed her binoculars. "I don't want to be involved in an incident again somehow."

"Suspicious fella."

"You are the one who showed up unguarded after that kind of incident last night. If you were the only one who came, I would've gone straight back, but since Yadorigi-san is here too..."

As a detective, it feels more reliable to be as vigilant as she is.

The car drove onto a fork in the road, from here we can see the avenue of the park.

"Let us listen to some music."

Yadorigi turned on the switch of the car stereo and began to play a somewhat familiar classical music.

"Ara, it's **Stravinsky**."

Mizuiyama reacted.

"You know him?"

"Yeah, It's a tune I like very much."

"I especially like his early ballet music. If I had not been a detective, I probably would have gone into ballet. Although my area of expertise as a detective is paintings fraud, I have absolutely no talent for painting."

Yadorigi pushed his sunglasses and said with a slight smile. Indeed, he is tall, model-shaped, and has slender hands and feet.

It's a waste for him to be a detective. I wonder why he became a detective then, but since his DSC rank has reached '2', he must be a fairly strong peer.

"Mizuiyama-san's expertise is construction-related, correct?"

Yadorigi asked.

"Yes, my main job is a first-class architect. It was by chance that I started detective work, but now I've been getting more and more commissions."

"Architecture and crime are inextricably linked, so it is not an exaggeration to say that. Speaking of which, I heard that there is a very interesting building across the sea here. Would you like to visit it?"

"Ara, then just the two of us..."

"Hey hey." Yaki interrupted their conversation. "Why make it sound like you two are on a blind date."

"Is Yaki-san coming along?" Yadorigi continued on his own. "I would like to teach me something about gambling, it may be useful in the future. It is your expertise, correct?"

"You're interested in gambling? Forget it, a guy like you who does what he wants will definitely be ripped off, and it'll be too late to cry."

"Really."

"Of course, don't underestimate the world of gambling. I don't know if the thing you're talking about is volleyball or basketball,

but a greenhouse-raised boy like you wouldn't understand. How should I put it, it's the feeling of walking a tightrope where the next move could burn your life away..."

As a result, Yaki was led by the nose by Yadorigi without knowing it.

"Umm... can we get to the point?" I couldn't stand it anymore and said. "Kirigiri-chan, can you explain it?"

Kirigiri nodded and began to explain the reason for calling the detectives.

About the Crime Victims' Relief Committee, about the twelve 'Black Challenges' initiated by Ryūzōji Gekka, and about the fact that we need help in order to solve the remaining five cases we are facing within the time limit.

"—This is how things are, so please help us."

I lowered my head and said.

The music playing in the stereo was just about to reach its climax, and the atmosphere in the car became tense.

"What's up with this criminal organization called whatever Committee... it's totally different from a simple little rascal. And that Ryūzōji Gekka is an executive of this organization, right?"
Yaki's facial muscles twitched and said. "But weren't you the detectives sent by Ryūzōji in that case yesterday?"

"The police seem to give Ryūzōji-san a lot of face... so he should have made arrangements for us so that we can carry out the investigation smoothly."

I answered.

"Salt for the enemy, huh?"

"They call this behavior 'fair play'."

"Where's the fair play? It's not fair at all."

"But... if they made it any harder, you won't be able to solve anything."

"No, I mean this game's too unfair to the perpetrators."

"Eh..."

I didn't even think about it.

"The detective can call as many assistants as they want, right? And there's no restriction on the ranks of the detectives. Even if the perpetrator chooses a case with a low rank, it's possible that the summoned detective will be a Zero. If the detectives act collectively, the 'Black Challenge' won't be fair at all, it's completely one-sided."

"But... perpetrators can choose the location of the crime and the techniques used, they can design it so that the detectives cannot act collectively. That's what I would do if I'm the perpetrator."

The reason why the previous 'Sirius Observatory Case' and 'Norman's Hotel Case' chose closed environments as the stages

for the cases is also for this reason. Needless to say, it would be ideal if even the police can't intervene.

"Normally, that's not a problem, but this time the twelve challenge letters were prepared by Ryūzōji, what about the perpetrators of these cases. Ryūzōji must have expected in advance that more than one detective will be deployed, and he had already calculated that another Triple-Zero rank would participate, right?"

When you think about it this way, it's true— especially those perpetrators who were caught by Lico before the case happened was a bit sad. They thought they were dealing with a rank '7' detective, but the strongest [000] came out of nowhere and caught them.

"I do not think it is unfair."

Yadorigi said.

He still maintained a calm expression and adjusted the position of his sunglasses.

"The perpetrators of the 'Black Challenges' are criminals who have lost their humanity and want revenge, correct? They have already transgressed the rules of human society, so why should we be fair to them?"

"What you mean is that those who have entered the underground casino and complain about being cheated don't deserve sympathy. I agree with this opinion... but underground casinos also have their own rules, so that the game can be established.

How did twelve challengers agree to such a disadvantageous game? That's the part I can't figure out..."

"Speaking of which, does the 'Black Challenge' really exist?" Mizuiyama said. "I still can't believe that the 'Armchair Earl' is actually a criminal."

"Yesterday's case was also one of the 'Black Challenges'. and you were all involved, so I'm sure you can understand the anomalies." I took out the challenge letter from my backpack. "This is the challenge letter. The perpetrator carried out the murder according to the contents written on it. We think Mizuiyama-san being wrongly accused as a murderer should be part of the plan."

"This can't be used as a basis for judgment."

Cautious, indeed.

If I were in her position, I would probably be as dubious as her. In fact, to this day, I still have an erratic sense of incongruity, just like everything in front of me is either a nightmare or a joke. Without Kirigiri Kyōko as a beacon, I probably wouldn't have been able to walk straight ahead.

What we are facing is not an ordinary opponent, but a respectable person. Because of this, it's no easy task to convince Mizuiyama and the others.

"Kirigiri-chan, forget it." I said, grabbing her arm. "Let's just rely on ourselves and do our best, time is precious."

"Hey hey, I didn't say I wouldn't help you. It's just that I can't accept it all at once after listening to what you said about Ryūzōji and the Committee?"

Yaki said as he stroked the nose of his rizen to.

"I can't help the two of you." Mizuiyama said bluntly. "I'm not an expert in murder cases, let alone criminal organizations."

It's normal to be turned down.

I knew this would be a lonely battle.

"Umm... Yadorigi-san, will you help us?"

I asked to the driver's seat.

"Before answering this question— there's one thing I would like to ask you, Kirigiri-san."

Yadorigi raised his head and looked at the rearview mirror. Because he is wearing sunglasses, I don't know where his gaze was cast.

"What is it?"

"A detective named Uozumi Taehime, does that ring any bells to you?"

"—What!"

I couldn't help but exclaim in disbelief.

She was a detective who died in the Norman's Hotel case. I didn't expect to hear her name in a place like this.

"It seems that the two of you know her." Yadorigi continued, his calm expression unchanged. "If possible, can you tell me what happened to her?"

Kirigiri recounted the tragedy that happened to Uozumi without emotion.

When Yadorigi listened to her, he didn't show any signs of sentiment, and continued to drive the car. The only thing that changed was that after the car stopped at a red light, it took a little longer for him to start driving again than before.

"I see, thank you for telling me this."

Yadorigi said briefly after listening.

"Excuse me... are you familiar with Uozumi-san?"

"Feel free to imagine." Yadorigi smiled at me through the rearview mirror. "Anyway, I have decided to assist you Kirigiri-san in full, no matter what kind your opponents are."

"Eeeh, for real? I mean, thank you very much."

Although I don't know why, it's always good to have an extra companion. Yadorigi's detective rank is very high, and the most important point is that he is easy to get along with. There are many weird people among detectives. Compared with them, he is like an oasis in the desert.

"You guys are so fast-paced, really." Yaki said helplessly. "Can you explain to us who got left behind?"

"First of all, it is a fact that Ryūzōji Gekka is an executive of the Crime Victims' Relief Committee. It is also true that this organization is choosing people who are willing to take revenge as challengers to participate in the game."

"Huh? How do you know this?"

"It is also true that Kirigiri-san and Yui-san are fighting the committee."

"Right, how can you be so sure."

"There were few things in the case yesterday that made me very concerned, **so this morning, I went to visit the murderer of the Takeda Haunted Mansion case.**"

"Wh-what?"

"It was the murderer who told me directly, she told me everything, including the committee, the rules of the game, et cetera, and it is consistent with what Kirigiri-san and Yui-san said just now."

"Huh? Why didn't you talk about this at first."

Yaki leaned forward to the front row and said.

Indeed, this guy is deliberately hiding his true thoughts, is he trying to test us?

"Did you actually visit her."

Mizuiyama said in surprise.

"Yes, I managed to get a permission but only when accompanied by an attorney. Recently, I learned of the existence of a mysterious criminal organization and have been conducting investigations secretly. Yesterday's case made me think it might be related to that, so I went to meet with the murderer. The facts proved that my speculations were correct."

"So the 'Black Challenges' really exist..."

Mizuiyama leaned her back on the seat and said.

"But, didn't the murderer lose the game yesterday? Will she be killed after losing?"

"To be precise, she will be killed when she can't repay the case expenses advanced to the committee." I answered Yaki's question, and suddenly felt a little strange. "Yadorigi-san, is she still safe now? Normally, she should have been killed by the committee long ago..."

"This time the situation is special. The total expenses for these twelve cases will be repaid by Ryūzōji Gekka. This is what the committee sent to tell her after she was arrested. In other words, the expenses have been paid off, even if the game is lost, the committee will not demand debt from her, so she has not been eliminated. Of course, since she has been arrested, she certainly cannot escape the legal punishment."

"So that's how it is... he is offsetting the disadvantages of the challenge by doing that. If that's the case, it's a different story. We can crush these criminals without hesitation."

Yaki crossed his arms and said, it seems that he has accepted this 'fair' formula.

"It's not 'fair' if the perpetrators themselves don't know this fact, is it?"

Mizuiyama intervened and said.

"No, if they knew, the game wouldn't work properly. Since you can then choose whatever amount of expenses you want, which will make the game unimaginably difficult. Controlling the expenses is the essence of this game."

"...You may be right, but your way of thinking like a casino dealer is a bit worrying."

"That's what happens when you spend a lot of time in the world of gambling."

Yaki said with a wry smile.

That said, I didn't expect that Ryūzōji would repay the expenses for these perpetrators.

Lico said that the attempted criminals who were caught by him are kept in Ryūzōji's castle, which was probably also arranged by Ryūzōji himself. They are considered to be withdrawn and would be detained until the end of the game. Of course, Lico also did so with this knowledge in mind.

"Now that a consensus has been reached, it's time for the next step of the discussion, alright? If you don't want to participate in the investigations, you can leave now."

Kirigiri said coldly.

"What about you, Mizuiyama?"

Yaki asked.

Mizuiyama showed a troubled expression. After humming for a while, she showed difficulty trying to say:

"I take back what I said earlier, I decided to help you guys. Personally, I also want to clear the shame of being wrongly accused of murder. But, I don't know if I can help you with my abilities."

"Thank you very much." I lowered my head and said. "Even one more companion is very helpful."

With that, this group of detectives, each with their own agenda, finally bonded, and the car carried us forward through the cold wind.

I feel more confident than ever before.

As long as we work together, we can do anything.

This time, we will do our best to solve the cases!

"—Then let me explain."

Kirigiri began to talk like it was a routine.

She is really calm, there is an obvious temperature difference with me.

"Of the remaining six cases, one of them is already being handled by another detective. Excluding that one, It just so happens that

there are five people here, so each one will be assigned a case, is that okay?"

"Assignments are fine. But before that, how about we appoint someone to be the leader?" Yaki said. "Lemme think of a name for the team."

"How about 'Team Phoenix'?" Yadorigi joined in the discussion. "It just happens that Stravinsky's 'Firebird' is playing right now..."

"No, I said that I'd name the team."

"Let's name it something a little cuter, preferably Japanese if we can."

Mizuiyama spoke.

"Hey, I told you to choose a leader first. No one wants to be? No choice then, I'll be the leader. What do you guys think?"

"That's fine." Kirigiri said. "I will continue. After we determine how to divide the cases, you will be sent to the crime scene to investigate. The purpose is to collect intelligence, but excessive intervention is strictly prohibited. What we need is accurate information, not credit."

"Are you telling us not to catch the criminals?"

"Yes, that's what it means in other words. In the 'Black Challenge' innocent people are also likely to be killed, so I want you to be more careful."

"Hey, you guys, be more careful."

Yaki deliberately said it again.

"Be especially careful when the incident hasn't yet occurred. For the perpetrator, the biggest goal is to carry out the murder according to the plan. If you interfere with their plan, they may attack you. As long as the game is passed, no matter how many crimes are committed during the time of the 'Black Challenge', they will all be erased in the end."

"Do you mean that even if you anticipate that the perpetrator will commit the crime, you have to pretend you do not know?"

Yadorigi asked.

"Yes. In that case, call Yui-onēsama."

"M-me?"

"Yui-onēsama is the detective. She will not be attacked by the perpetrators and is the most reliable partner among us."

"Only because of the rules."

I said mockingly.

"Then, regardless of the results of the investigation, you have to contact Yui-onēsama at noon every day. You can use the mobile phone number given by Ryūzōji Gekka. There is a possibility of it being tapped, but that doesn't matter."

"Everyone calling at the same time might occupy the line. Then I'll call at noon, the fast-paced guy will call 15 minutes before that, while Mizuiyama will call 15 minutes after, and the little kid in 15 minutes after that, is this okay?"

Everyone nodded.

"Then let's decide the case assignments."

"It's time to decide the case assignments, you guys!"

"I'm responsible for the most expensive case."

Kirigiri picked up the challenge letter of the 'Twins Ability Development Institute'. She's planning to challenge the Ultimate Locked Room, as expected of Kirigiri-chan.

"Then I will choose the farthest case." Yadorigi said. "I am very confident about my mobility, I rarely stay in the country because of work, and I always fly around the world."

"But you were late today."

The farthest case from here is the 'Kareobana Academy'. However, I heard that the 'Kareobana Academy' doesn't actually exist. It's just a nickname of an abandoned school, and is a location for paranormal activity.

The case that Yadorigi is responsible for is decided to be the 'Kareobana Academy'.

"What about the remaining three?"

Yaki took the remaining challenge letters in his hand and shook it.

"Why don't you choose the event with the higher cost, onēsama?" Yaki said. "You're more experienced in dealing with the Committee."

"Eh, but..." I hesitated. "I'll have to investigate alone, right?"

Do I have the ability to do that in Kirigiri's absence?

—No, I must fight bravely.

It's not good to rely on her too much, and I have to let her know that I can solve cases on my own.

"Okay, then I'll take the 'Libra Girls' Academy'."

"That place is very suitable for a high school girl like you."

"Then I will..."

The rest is the 'Goodbye BAR' with a cost of 76 million and the 'Museum of Medieval Western Europe Torture Devices' with a cost of 140 million. the difference between the two is almost double.

"I choose the museum."

"Hey, this leaves me with the cheapest one!"

"...Do you want to exchange?"

"No, forget it if you like that."

"I've been to that museum once. and like its name, it's a display of various devices used for torture throughout history." Mizuiyama said, putting her hand on her mouth. "But that place closed years ago..."

"The usual practice of the committee is to buy places that have been closed, and then transform them into stages for cases."

I said.

"There's only one left. The leader will be in charge of the 'BAR' case then."

The cases for which everyone is responsible for have been settled.

‘Goodbye BAR’ Yaki Hajiki

‘Museum of Medieval Western Europe Torture Devices’
Mizuiyama Sachi

‘Kareobana Academy’ Salvador Yadorigi Fukurō

‘Libra Girls' Academy’ Samidare Yui

‘Twins Ability Development Institute’ Kirigiri Kyōko

"I repeat, all we need is intelligence, we don't expect you to catch the perpetrator."

Kirigiri reminded again.

"I get it." Yaki said impatiently. "By the way, what kinda intelligence do you need?"

"It's mainly about the situation at the crime scene. The information that you can't know just from news reports and police announcements is what really will shape the course of the cases. For example, the small waste dropped on the crime scene, the hard to smell odor, weather and geographical conditions, and so on. Also important are the profiles of the people involved in the cases, especially the birthdays of the people involved, which I hope you will make sure to inquire about."

"Birthdays? What does that have to do with the case?"

"I will explain the details later, when we can all meet again safely."

"Don't say this ominous stuff."

Yaki seemed to have thought that this sentence would pass with a smile, but the car was silent. I must not be the only one who heard the footsteps of the Shinigami in the silence.

"The station is almost here."

After hearing Yadorigi's words, we snapped back to our senses and looked out the car window. The car had unknowingly returned to the same place where we had met near the station.

The car stopped beside the Snowflake Monument.

"One last point." said Kirigiri. "The related expenses will be reimbursed by me."

"How could I ask you for money." Yaki said unhappily, opening the door of the car. "I don't want your money, but you still have to call me leader."

I nodded, Yaki gave a thumbs up with his back to us, and disappeared among the crowds in front of the station.

"If there are results, I will receive a corresponding payment." Mizuiyama said as she got out of the car. "I will inform the mailing address of the receipt afterwards."

She walked to the sidewalk, turned around and bowed to us, then entered the station.

"If you do not mind, I will send you back."

Yadorigi in the driver's seat said.

"No, the next place to go is the scene of the crime, I can go alone."

Kirigiri answered.

"That's right, let's all go for it."

Kirigiri and I got out of the car.

Yadorigi gave us a slight wave, then started the car and disappeared at the end of the driveway.

I'm left alone with Kirigiri again.

We passed through the ticket gate of the station and went to the platform.

Kirigiri and I are going in opposite directions. Judging from the number of trains displayed on the electronic screen, the train that Kirigiri is going to ride should arrive first.

"Are we going to part here for now?"

I asked, and Kirigiri nodded.

I felt uneasy about being separated from Kirigiri. I'm a little scared about whether I can handle the next case alone, but the thought of not seeing her again for a while after parting with her here is even scarier.

"Even if Yui-onēsama is the detective, you can't pursue the perpetrator. The most important thing is to collect intelligence and return safely."

"I know."

"Also, Yui-onēsama, you must be careful of Libra, that person might be the perpetrator."

"Huh? The perpetrator?"

"Yes, if my hunch is correct, the constellation of the perpetrator of the Libra Girls' Academy is Libra. You have to investigate the birthdays of all the people involved and confirm their constellations."

"H-how is that? How did you know?"

"This is the rule of the game by Ryūzōji Gekka."

Just then, the train that Kirigiri is to take entered the station. Her hair fluttered gently and her voice got muffled.

The doors opened, and a torrent of passengers getting off passed through us.

"I will explain later."

After Kirigiri finished speaking, she planned to get in the car.

I hugged her tightly, determined never to let go again—

However in reality I only held her for three seconds before sending her away and watching the train doors close in front of my eyes. I couldn't have been clearer about what my top priority is right now.

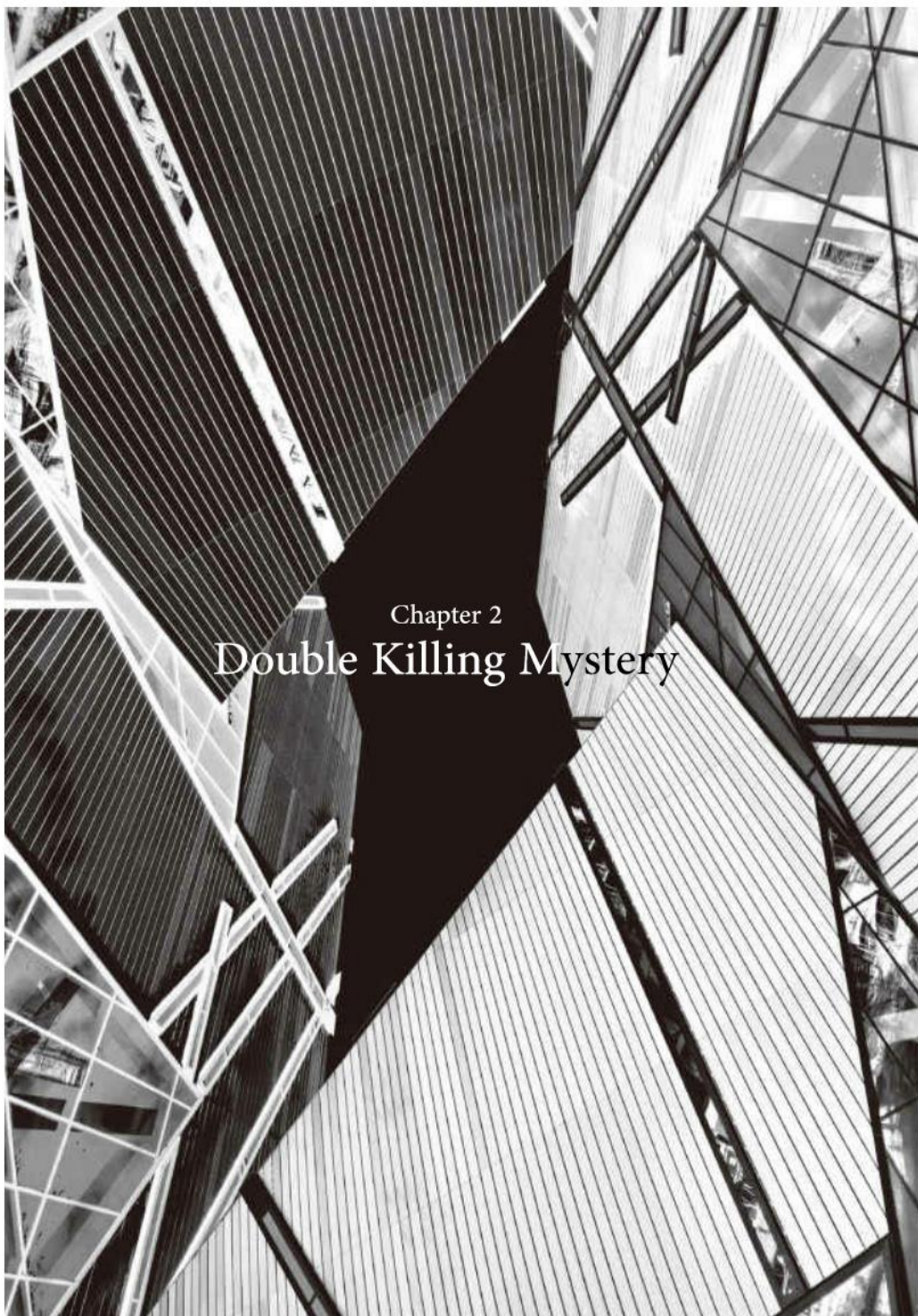
The train started.

Kirigiri kept staring at me through the car window with a confused expression until I couldn't see her.

There are 142 hours left.

Is it really a good idea to involve the three detectives, Yaki, Mizuiyama, and Yadorigi, too?

With anxiety in my heart, I got on the train and went to the next stage of the challenge.



Chapter 2

Double Killing Mystery

Libra Girls' Academy – Samidare Yui

Huh?

My face is wet.

Why am I crying?

Did something sad happen?

Or is it because I had that dream again?

The reason is not very clear.

Besides...

Did the same thing happen before?

My eyes are blurry.

My glasses are gone.

I subconsciously stretched my hands around. In the midst of my gradually waking consciousness, I finally realized that I'm lying on the ground.

Why am I lying on the ground like this?

After separating from Kirigiri-chan, I—

Uhhh, what happened to me?

I looked up thoughtlessly—

There is a person standing in front of me, wrapped in a black cloak from head to toe, and they are staring at me.

"Kyaa!"

I screamed immediately, supporting the upper half of my body.

The black cloak person reacted to this, and they took a step back, pulling away from me.

The hood on the person's head was pressed down low, their mouth and nose were also covered with a white mask, and I'm not wearing my glasses still, so I could hardly see their face.

Who are you?

I wanted to ask, but hesitated.

The cloaked person is holding a gray rod in their right hand.

It's an iron pipe.

It's speckled with dark red spots.

Blood stains?

I kept moving backwards with my rear still on the ground, trying to stay as far away from the cloaked person as possible. My whole body was sweating coldly, and my heartbeat sounded like the countdown of my life.

What on earth is happening?

What is this person planning to do with this gruesome thing?

Did I pass out after being hit by that iron pipe?

Are they planning to finish me off with another blow?

My mind is a mess, only instinctively trying to escape by moving backwards.

The tips of my fingers suddenly touched something soft behind me.

Looking back, there is a girl in a sailor uniform lying there. Her face is pale and her eyes are open as she is staring up at the ceiling.

There is blood on the floor all around.

She is dead...

I looked at the cloaked again.

But instead of lunging at me, they turned their back and ran away as if they had suddenly remembered something.

They opened a sliding door and escaped.

"W-wait!"

I stumbled to my feet and tried to go after the black cloak.

Before that, my glasses—

I looked around the room, looking for my glasses on the red carpet. This room is circular, and I'm almost in the middle. There is a desk against the wall. Also, there are no other furniture or decorations. There is a door and no windows. And My glasses have fallen near my feet.

I put on my glasses and checked the girl lying on the ground again. The girl is wearing a uniform I hadn't seen before. She has short

hair, and short bangs which are stained with blood and stuck to her forehead.

I touched her pale neck.

No pulse.

I can't feel any temperature too.

I felt confused and angry at the same time.

Another person was killed.

Why...

Why did this happen!

A corner of the student handbook is exposed in the chest pocket of the sailor uniform. I took it out, didn't rush to open and read it, but instead put it in my own pocket. It won't be too late to read it later.

The murderer must be caught first.

I opened the sliding door and rushed out of the room.

Outside is a straight corridor with no forks.

It seemed to be an old wooden building with red carpets on the floor and lighting fixtures on the walls at intervals, all in the shape of oil lamps.

The door on the opposite side is wide open, I can see that behind it is a vast space.

And— the back of the black cloak, they are running forward through the door.

"Wait!"

I yelled and ran.

The black cloak glanced back at me, speeding up their running. But perhaps because they are so panicked, they left the door open, and I could see their fleeing figure clearly.

This way I won't lose them.

I rushed into the hall.

It's a quiet and cold place—

Maybe this place should be called a chapel, with its statue of Mary, a pulpit and benches for worshippers. The room is rectangular and very spacious.

I went across the middle of the chapel and continued to chase the black cloak.

They passed through the opposite door and escaped into another narrow corridor. they still didn't close the door and just ran away. they probably thought closing the door would only waste time.

Another straight corridor.

The black cloak fled the corridor. There is another wide open door further ahead, and the black cloak dove through it at once.

There!

This time the black cloak closed the door.

I ran at full speed and finally reached the door.

I grabbed the door and tried to open the sliding door but—

it wouldn't open.

There is no regular handle on the door; I made sure to use my fingers to clasp the recessed handle to make the door slide open sideways. But no matter how hard I pulled to the side, the door remained motionless, as if it's fixed.

Is it locked?

Or is it blocked by a latch?

I shook it with some force, but the door still didn't move.

"Open the door! Open up!"

I used my body to bang on the door.

Of course, the door was not that easy for me to break.

With a feeling of almost giving up, I once again grabbed the door and gently pulled to the side, and it opened easily.

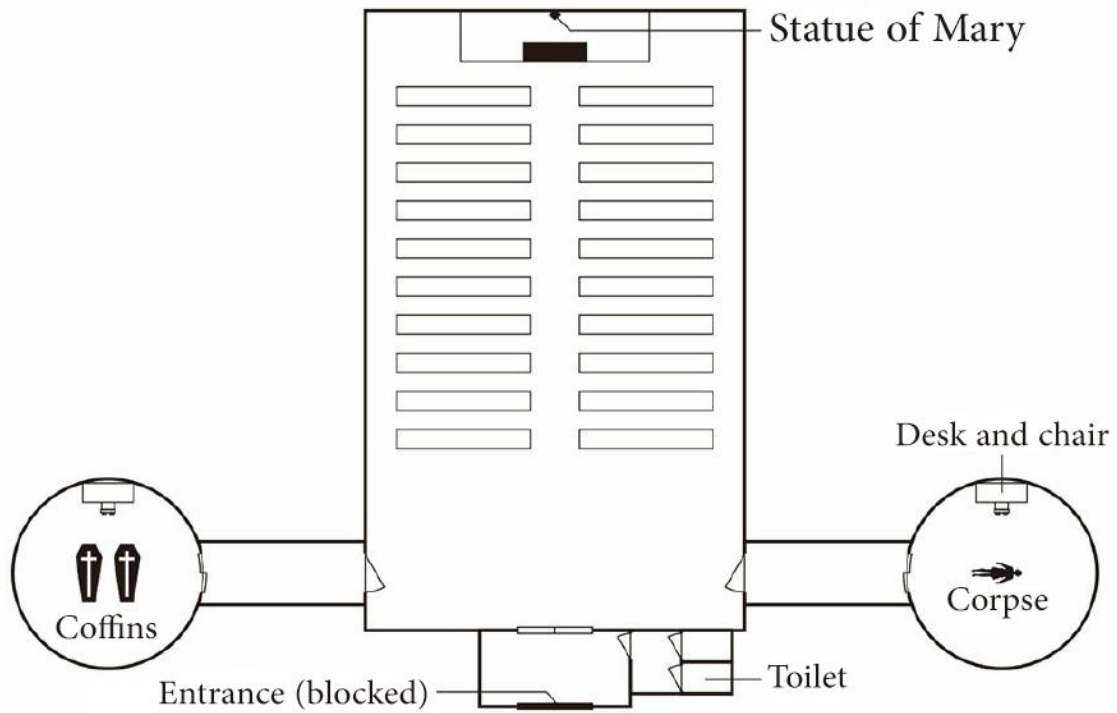
Huh?

I couldn't open it just now...

It's as if I was being lured out.

I opened the door tremblingly.

This room is very similar to the one I was in just now. It's a circular room with curved walls. A desk is solely placed against the wall. There are no other entrances and exits like doors and windows.



Bird's eye view of Libra Girls' Academy

But the black cloak is nowhere to be seen in the room.

Disappeared—?

Instead, **in the center of the room are two large rectangular boxes side by side.**

Crosses are engraved on the lids of the boxes.

These are coffins.

The two coffins are placed side by side.

What's the connection between the chapel and the coffins?

I looked around the room again.

I could see at a glance that there is no one here.

If there is any place to hide—

"I- I know you are hiding there!"

I shouted at the coffins.

I did see the black cloak entering this room.

they have nowhere to go except here.

The black cloak must be inside one of the coffins.

The question is, in which of these coffins they are hiding—

Is this going to be another game that forces me to make a choice?

I wonder if there will be any punishment if I guess wrong?

I approached the coffin and tried to push it to the side with the tip of my shoe to confirm the weight. One of the coffins must be heavier since the black cloak should be inside.

I tried both coffins, and the weight on both sides felt almost the same. In fact, I couldn't move the two coffins at all with my foot.

I walked away from the coffins and compared the two.

Regardless of which one has the black cloak, this situation is quite advantageous for me.

I can simply just **seal the two coffins so that they cannot be opened.**

Yes, surely this is the correct answer.

Maybe the murderer didn't expect me to wake up so soon, were they preparing to arrange the complicated locked room technique? And they were caught off guard and chose to escape because I woke up too early.

I moved the desk that was placed against the wall to the coffins. Although this desk can be moved with my hands, it shouldn't be easy to open the coffin lid from the inside if it's pressed on top of the coffin.

I lifted the desk and planned to put it on top of a coffin's lid.

At this time, a coffin in front of me trembled slightly.

Someone is inside!

There must be someone in this coffin.

But something feels a bit wrong.

"Hmph— Hmmph—"

The voice sounded like a desperate call for help.

Since the voice sounded so desperate, I couldn't help but reach for the lid.

I pressed my hands on the lid and pushed it open with little effort.

I see inside the coffin.

A person lying there on their back—

No black cloak, but a girl in a sailor uniform.

She is unable to say anything because of the tape on her mouth. she looks uninjured, and her glossy black hair and white hair band are striking. She is probably a high school student, and the uniform she is wearing seems to belong to the same school as the victim I saw in the other room earlier.

Our eyes met.

She looked at me with terrified eyes.

"HMPH—!"

"N-no, I'm—"

It seems she is mistakenly thinking I'm going to attack her.

On closer inspection, she has handcuffs on both hands and shackles on both feet; she was put in the coffin without being able to move.

"Wait, I'll save you right away. I'll tear off the tape for you."

I slowly removed the tape covering her mouth.

"Help! Please don't kill me!"

"I'm not gonna kill you! I said I'm gonna save you."

I checked the handcuffs, and it doesn't look like they are easy to remove. There is a keyhole on it, I can open it as long as I can find the key.

I looked inside the coffin.

Nothing at all. But—

Maybe the black cloak quickly took off the cloak and threw it aside after entering this room, climbed into the coffin, put herself in handcuffs and shackles, and pretended to be a victim to escape the pursuit.

It's a natural reasoning, my mind is quite clear today.

"Sorry about this."

"W-what are you doing!"

I examined the body of the girl in the sailor uniform, even looked inside the skirt. The girl couldn't move and could only let me do whatever I wanted.

But the black cloak that was taken off is nowhere to be found.

That cloak was enough to envelop a person from head to toe. It was so big that it's definitely not something hard to find.

Moreover, the black cloak also held an iron pipe that's likely to be

the murder weapon, and if it was hidden in the coffin, it would surely be visible at once.

However, at least it's not in this coffin.

In this case, the black cloak is in the other coffin?

"You can't run away anymore!"

I shouted to the tightly closed coffin.

The coffin reacted to my voice and began to make a thumping sound.

There seems to be someone inside.

However, the muffled sound coming from the coffin also sounded like a cry for help. Judging from that voice, the person's mouth should also be taped.

What is going on?

I carefully opened the lid of the coffin.

Like the coffin next to it, there is a girl in a sailor uniform lying inside, with her mouth sealed, and her hands and feet handcuffed. A high school girl with short red hair.

She looked up at me, her body trembling like a cramp.

Neither one is the black cloak?

This can't be.

I checked the inside of the coffin.

But I still couldn't find the black cloak and iron pipe.

Could it be hidden somewhere else?

Where could it be hidden, for example?

I opened the drawer of the desk to check inside.

There is only a memo paper and a pencil in the drawer, and nothing else.

Does the coffin have two bottom layers?

Or does the floor under the coffins actually have a hidden storage space?

—Both places are empty.

"Hmmp— hmph—"

"I'll take it off for you in a minute, hold on."

I tore off the tape from the red-haired girl's mouth.

"...What's this all about, why do we have such bad luck?"

She said as she propped up her upper body in the coffin and gazed at me with suspicion.

"I didn't do it."

"Nazu! Nazu, right?" The girl with the hair band looked at the other girl and called. "Why are you here?"

"Tsukiyo-san! You too, why are you here?"

It seems that these two know each other.

"I don't know, I woke up when this girl was about to attack me!"

"I was not!"

I desperately shook my head in denial.

"Then who do you think did all this!" The girl with the hair band yelled hysterically. "Don't think anything good will come out of you doing this, God will surely punish you!"

"I'm the one who should be asking you! Did one of you do it?"

"What do you think we can do in this state."

The girl with the hair band sat in the coffin and held up the handcuffs on both hands for me to see, the chain made a rattling sound.

I walked up to her and stretched my hand to her chest.

"W-what are you doing!"

"Let me make sure."

I drew the student handbook out from her chest pocket.

St. Anne Girls' Academy

1st Year, Class D, Nada Tsukiyo

Birthday: July 30th

There is also a photo of her on it. In the photo, her long black hair is separated from the middle, exposing her entire forehead without a hair band, and her slender eyes showed her strong

personality. I wonder if she usually have this kind of look that feels like she is glaring at someone.

"Let me check this side too."

I pulled out the other girl's student handbook.

St. Anne Girls' Academy

1st year, Class D, Tōakitsu Nazuna

Birthday: August 21st

This girl has droopy eyes, red hair, and a cute bob haircut with curls. She appears to be an honest, quiet girl with a gentle personality.

"You two are classmates?"

"Yeah, that's right."

Tsukiyo replied.

"Do you know why things have turned out the way they are now?"

"How could I possibly know!" Nazuna said in a loud voice. "What's wrong with you? Aren't you the one without handcuffs? Isn't that the strange part here?"

"I'm a high school girl like you two... but now I'm here as a detective."

"Detective?"

"Yes."

I said somewhat proudly and was about to flash my Detective Library registration card in style, but the wallet containing my registration card wasn't in my pocket anymore. Not only that, even my mobile phone is gone, and I suddenly realized that I don't have my backpack either.

"A-aaah, everything is gone!"

"Are you really a detective?"

"Y-yes really, my DSC number is [887], specializing in kidnapping, intimidation, and these kinds of cases..."

"What's that number? I've never heard of it. Hey, Nazu, this girl is likely the one who did this to us, she's too suspicious. Before God punishes her, let's punish her first."

"No, I believe her." Nazuna said calmly. "If she was going to do anything to us, she would have done it already."

"...That's right." Tsukiyo suddenly became nice. "Since Nazu said so, then I believe so too."

"Thank you for being willing to believe me."

Although I said so, I don't think I can fully believe them both for now.

The black cloak entered this room without a doubt, and I did witness them enter the room through the door.

But when I entered the room, the black cloak was gone.

One of them is surely the black cloak.

No, *what if both of them are?*

"Detective-san, could you please explain to us the current situation?"

Nazuna said.

I nodded and sorted out my memories in order to explain to them.

But what happened before I woke up are fogged up, and feels vague. I parted with Kirigiri at the station, and then went to the location of the case I'm in charge of, 'Libra Girls' Academy'.

As mentioned before, 'Libra Girls' Academy' was abandoned several years ago. After getting off the train, I changed to a bus and went to the abandoned school where the problem is. I do remember the bus ride, but I have no memory of after that.

When I woke up, I found myself lying in a strange place.

Was the murderer following me the whole time?

Or was a passenger or the driver on the bus working with the murderer?

Maybe the murderer paid an assistant to make me unconscious in some way according to the murderer's instructions, and then moved me here. I encountered the same method in the 'Sirius Observatory Case'.

I was too careless.

The case had already started before I arrived at the scene.

"I received a crime warning letter saying that someone is going to get killed at 'Libra Girls' Academy'. So I went there to investigate the case... I lost consciousness somehow on the way, and when I woke up, I'm in this building. I think this may be 'Libra Girls' Academy'."

I explained briefly.

"What kind of academy is that? I've never heard of it. Are you making stuff up? 'Thou Shall Not Lie'— lying is an infidelity to God."

Tsukiyo cried out immediately.

"I'm not making stuff up, here's proof."

I took out the student handbook of the murdered girl in the other room from my pocket.

I checked the name and photo.

St. Anne Girls' Academy

1st year, class D, Takesaki Hana

Birthday: March 3rd

She is a girl with big round eyes.

It's the dead body I have just seen just now.

"Unfortunately, the murder has succeeded. I saw this girl in another room who had been killed. Do you know her?"

I opened the handbook to the two girls sitting in the coffins.

"It's our classmate." Tsukiyo replied. "But I didn't talk to her much."

"Takesaki-san... had been killed?"

Nazuna asked.

"Yeah, she was bleeding from her head and fallen to the ground. I also saw the murderer, who was wearing a black cloak that covered their whole body... That person fled to this room, so I followed them."

"This room?"

Tsukiyo looked around the room.

Of course, there is no black black cloak here.

"He was gone when I entered the room. There are only two coffins here. The two coffins containing you."

"—*So you are saying that one of us is the murderer in the black cloak?*"

Hearing Nazuna's straightforward words, I nodded involuntarily.

"Enough of you, this is a complete misunderstanding." Tsukiyo shook her head from side to side as a deep frown creased her brows. "As far as we know, you're the one who started this prank. I woke up inside a dark coffin and the first thing I heard was that

annoying voice of yours and thought I was having a nightmare. Even now I still have this feeling, if this is a dream, then I really hope you just let me wake up right away!"

"Sorry, I apologize for scaring you, but—"

"Besides, how do you think we handcuffed ourselves like this and then crawled into the coffin."

"Just by changing the order of events. After climbing into the coffin, you put the tape on your mouth, then you put on the shackles, and finally the handcuffs, then covered the lid of the coffin from the inside. It's not impossible. "

I retorted like this, and Tsukiyo was silent.

Logically speaking, there is no other hiding place beside the coffins.

One of them is –or maybe the two of them are– lying.

Who are they?

Why were they in coffins.

And where did the murderer –the black cloak– disappear to?

A net of questions I don't understand.

Even so, if Kirigiri was here, she would surely be able to solve these mysteries immediately. Faced with this puzzling case, I once again deeply realized how amazing she is, and at the same time, I also felt that I really cannot keep going without her.

I didn't think her absence would make me this lonely...

She must have encountered her case by now.

I wonder if she is safe?

I know that worrying is completely redundant, but there is a what-if in everything. If she is injured, I must rush to help her.

That's right... I can't stay in this place forever.

Kirigiri-chan.

We must return to the dormitory together again—

Twins Ability Development Institute – Kirigiri Kyōko

Tsutsumi Tōya felt someone shaking his shoulder and opened his eyes.

A young girl is crouching in front of him.

Who is she—?

Tsutsumi propped up his body and shook his head, trying to clear his consciousness.

"How do you feel, how are your injuries?"

The young girl in front of him asked.

"Injuries...?"

He inadvertently stretched his hand to the back of his head and touched it. there was a moist touch, and the palm of his hand was stained with a red liquid.

Blood.

"If you feel uncomfortable, it's better not to move." the young girl stood up and turned around. "I will ask you about the incident later."

She seems to have lost interest in Tsutsumi, and turned to look at the LCD monitor on the table. The young girl, despite behaving like an adult, looks like she should only be in middle school age. Her hair is braided in two braids and tied with ribbons, hanging over both her shoulders. She is wearing what seems to be the

uniform of a certain school, and her white legs are exposed under a pleated skirt that looks as hard as steel, giving a feeling of fragility and vulnerability.

Who the hell is she...?

"Tsutsumi-san, what happened?"

This time it was the voice from behind.

There stood a woman in a white coat.

Her name is Hoshī Taruhi, and she is one of the researchers in this Twins Ability Development Institute. Including Tsutsumi, there are a total of four researchers, of which she is the youngest, and it's said that she is still a graduate student. She is wearing a striking bright red lipstick. At first glance, she looks like the hot kind of girl who likes to go out and have fun, but she is actually a talented woman who works on cutting-edge genetic research. The black sweater she is wearing matched the white coat. Tsutsumi noticed that only the two thumbs on her two hands are painted with bright red nail polish. Maybe it's to match her lipstick.

"I just want to ask you." said Tsutsumi as he finally got up from the ground. "Why was I lying on the floor and with blood on my head?"

"I also found myself sleeping for almost three hours on the bench in the smoking room when I woke up. There is no heat in that room and I almost froze to death."

Hoshī hugged her body with her arms and said, she did indeed turn blue from cold.

"I'm going to get a cup of coffee."

Hoshī used the coffee machine to pour coffee into the cup.

"I advise you not to drink it."

The young girl said suddenly.

She is still staring at the monitor and did not look back.

"There may be sleeping pills in it."

"Sleeping pills...? By the way, who are you?"

Hoshī and Tsutsumi looked at each other

"What the hell is with you? Why did you enter the research institute and tamper with the monitor without permission? We don't allow unrelated personnel to enter."

"The research pretense is over."

The young girl pointed to the monitor and said.

The screen showed the situation in Room R from the corner. The room is very small, about the size of 6 tatami mats (9.72m^2 or 104.6ft^2), with a bed made of iron pipes, a small LCD TV, and a toilet and sink that had been partitioned.

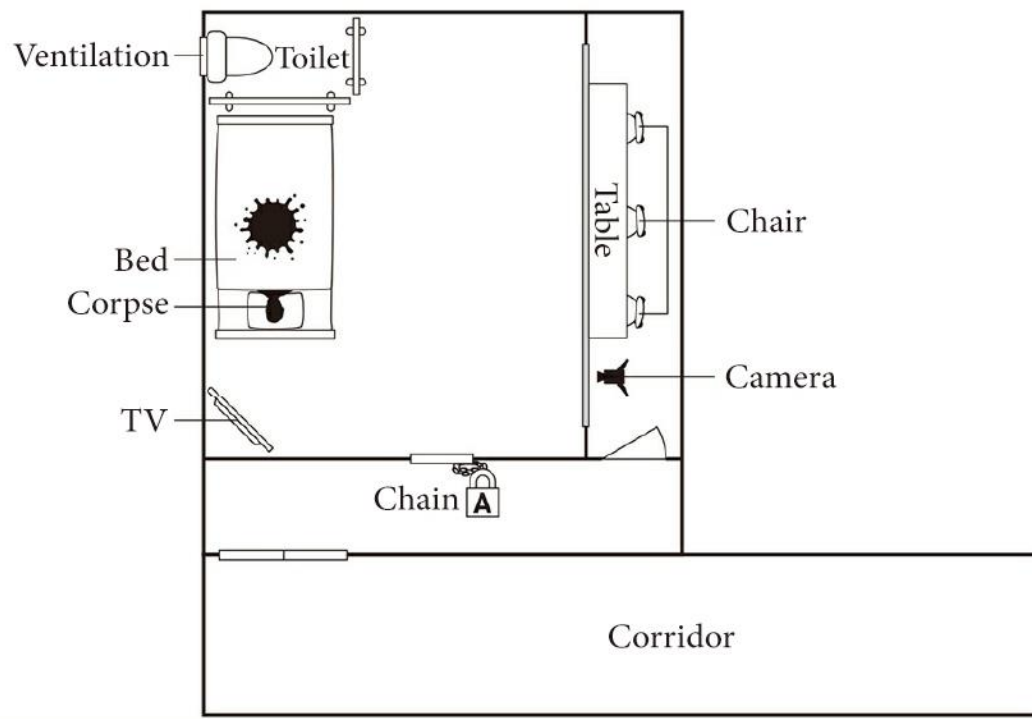
One of the twins who are the subject of research is in this R room...

"Suō-kun is sleeping on the bed."

Hoshī reached out her hand and pointed. A human shape is bulging out of the bed, and the younger brother of the twins, Kyūren Suō, is sleeping there, his head toward the monitor.

But something is wrong.

The center of the white quilt is dyed red.



Room L

It wasn't there before.

In the center of this red patch, there is a small knife that's shining with silver glitter.

"Not good!" Tsutsumi just noticed that something is off and called out. "Suō-kun was stabbed to death!"

"How could..."

Hoshī covered her mouth with both hands and couldn't speak.

"What... the hell happened? I'm completely confused about the situation..."

Tsutsumi pressed his aching head, pushed the young girl aside, and came to the operation panel of the monitor. There are four LCD monitors, two of which showed the situation in Room R. Tsutsumi switched the camera to observe Suō's situation from another angle.

One of the cameras showed Suō's face in detail with his eyes open and facing the camera.

His eyes aren't blinking, and there is no sign of breathing.

"What's going on here!"

Two of the four monitors are showing the tragic situation in Room R, while the remaining two are black screens.

Originally, these two should be displaying Room L. The other twin is in Room L. However, no matter how it is operated, the monitor still shows nothing. It isn't clear if there is a malfunction or not.

"A bit too late."

The girl whispered coldly.

"What do you know? Come on, tell us clearly—"

Tsutsumi tried to grab the young girl's shoulder.

However, the girl drew away lightly, avoiding his hand.

"Before that, wouldn't it be better to go and confirm the situation first?"

"Y-yeah! Let's go to Room R and have a look!"

Hoshī rushed out of the surveillance room.

Tsutsumi immediately chased Hoshī, but when he came to the corridor, he suddenly remembered something, stood still and turned his head.

He pointed at the girl.

"Don't mess with that machine over there!"

"Don't worry." the young girl walked out of the surveillance room behind Tsutsumi. "I will go with you two."

"Why? Just stay still!"

"If I stay in that room, I think I will touch those machines. If you don't mind this..."

"Okay okay!" Tsutsumi said defeated. "Don't do anything extra, alright?"

"I haven't done anything extra from the beginning."

"Shut up, noisy brat!"

Tsutsumi shouted out in a non-adult-like manner, and ran forward along the corridor.

The corridor stretches straight ahead and split into two paths at the end. This research institute is a T-shaped structure. Turning right along the corridor is Room R, and turning left is Room L, which means literally. R stands for Right and L stands for Left. Besides, there are no other rooms. The toilets, restrooms and lounges are located in another building.

Hoshī left the surveillance room before the other two. She is now in the corridor on the right.

There is a large door blocking the way.

The door handles of this double door were wrapped with a chain around it, which looks very strong, and there is a large silver padlock hung on it.

A big 'C' is written on the padlock in grease pen.

"Who is 'C' again?"

"It's me." Hoshī said. "It's **Hoshī's 'C'**."

There is no keyhole on the bottom of the padlock, but a large circular cavity instead. Hoshī put her index finger into the hole, and the lock immediately opened.

"Fingerprint authentication?"

The young girl asked.

"Yes, it can only be opened with my finger."

After Tsutsumi and Hoshī removed the padlock, they unlocked the door from the chains together and opened it.

The corridor behind the door extended straight ahead and is about 10 meters long. There is a sliding door on the left at the end of the corridor, behind the door is Room R. The door is unlocked.

They opened the door and entered. At the entrance is a small, narrow room, which is meant for another room inside— As an analogy, it's like a hospital waiting room.

There are two doors on the opposite wall. Behind the doors is the main Room R.

The door handle on the right is also chained like the one before. Something different from the previous one is that these doors aren't double-doors, so the chain is in a loop with the wall and wrapped around the handle several times.

A padlock with 'D' written on it was hung on the chain.

"It's my turn."

Tsutsumi was about to put his trembling fingertip in the padlock scanner.

"Wait." the young girl's voice came out from behind. "Check what's inside through the other door before you unlock it."

"Huh?" Tsutsumi said in an anxious tone. "What are you talking about, it's an emergency situation!"

"It's because the situation is an emergency that I'm saying this."

The young girl replied with an indifferent look. "One of the surveillance cameras was showing a one-way mirror. If I'm thinking about this correctly, then this room is where the person you are using as a research subject is at, and you can observe him through the one-way mirror in the next room. Am I correct?"

"...Ah, true. What—"

About it? Tsutsumi was about to ask, but Hoshī had already opened the door next to him.

"You mean to say that even if we don't unlock the door, we can still check the situation in the room from here, right?"

"That's what I mean."

Hoshī and the young girl entered the room together.

An unpleasant emotion surged in Tsutsumi's heart, who was left alone, and he followed the two into the room.

As the young girl said, the room is set up to monitor the next room through a one-way mirror. In this long and narrow space, there is a long table, iron pipe chairs, and a camera mounted on a tripod. A huge one-way mirror is inlaid on the wall on the right hand side, and the situation in the chain-sealed room next to it is unobstructed.

The three of them held their breath.

The room is all white, fluorescent white light shining on the white walls and floor. The brightness is somewhat out of reality. Perhaps

because of the one-way mirror, the scene even felt like a fantasy, and what they are seeing is a window to that world.

The only distinctive color is the bright red in the center of the bed. It looks vivid, forcing Tsutsumi and the others to face reality.

The younger brother of the twins, Kyūren Suō, is dead.

The knife is still stuck in the center of the red patch.

"Same as we saw on the monitor. Are you satisfied?"

Tsutsumi asked the young girl.

The young girl nodded slightly, probably because she is satisfied, she walked out of the room, and then immediately—

"Hurry up and unlock the door."

Her voice came from outside.

What's the matter with this kid?

Tsutsumi clicked his tongue inwards, came out of the room, and walked to the lock. Why does he have to take orders from such a little brat? He inserted his finger into the padlock to unlock it.

Damn it. It's unlocked now. Is that guy really...

He removed the chain wrapped around the handle and pulled open the door.

The young girl was the first to enter the room and approached Suō on the bed. She touched Suō's neck to confirm his pulse, then the girl slowly shook her head and lowered her eyes.

Tsutsumi and Hoshī didn't enter the room, they stood at the door and stretched their necks to look inside.

"What on earth is going on here?" Hoshī said with her hands on her hips. "This isn't a prank show, is it? Is he really dead?"

"Yes, it has probably been more than an hour since his death."

The young girl said while observing the situation in the room.

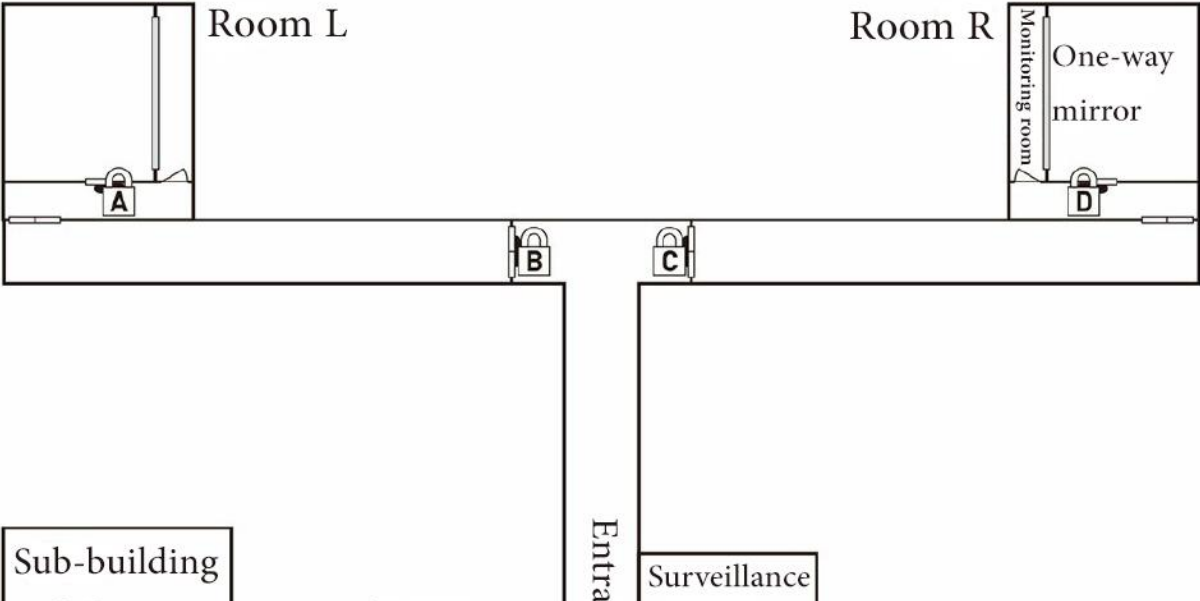
At first glance, only the bed is abnormal, and nothing had fallen on the floor. The room setup like the monitor and toilet seem to be normal.

"There is a vent, but people shouldn't be able to get in and out from that."

The young girl looked up at the air vent directly above the toilet. There is an iron mesh panel inlaid on the vent, and the ventilating fan inside is rotating. The vent is about 10cm long on one side, and as the girl said, it's too narrow for a person to enter. There are no traces of tampering on the iron mesh board.

Next, the girl began to check the one-way mirror. From this room, it looks like a mirror, and you can't see what's happening in the next room. In addition, the edges of the mirror are fully fitted, without any gaps, and cannot be opened, closed, or taken off.

The room has no windows, the only entrance is the sliding door. However, the door was locked with a padlock and chains until just now.



And, on the way to this room. there is a double door, which was also chained and padlocked.

Room R was double locked.

"Is this... a locked room murder mystery?"

Tsutsumi said to himself.

"Yes."

The girl answered. She crawled and looked under the bed, but without luck. At last she stood up, brushed the dust off her jacket, and twiddled the hair on her face.

"It's indeed a locked room murder mystery, but there's nothing that's really bothering me at the moment."

"Haa? There's so much I don't understand!" Tsutsumi raised his voice a little frustrated. "You don't even know what happened, I'm pretty sure we locked this R room and the door in the middle when we finished the experiment. It was tightly sealed, a completely locked room. Do you actually think the person who stabbed Suō-kun to death had a way to break in."

"Since the door was locked, the only way to get in was after unlocking the padlocks."

"How would that happen? The doors locks are fingerprint-authenticated electronic locks. These locks can only be opened with the respective pre-registered fingerprints. The 'C' lock can only be opened by Hoshī, and the 'D' lock can only be opened by me. I'll tell you in advance that the gelatin or clay method to replicate fingerprints isn't feasible. The scanner can sense blood vessels and pulses, if it isn't a living person's finger it will not respond. In other words, the only way to do it is for me and Hoshī to come up to the locks and stick our fingers inside the lock hol—"

When Tsutsumi said this, he seemed to think of something suddenly and shouted:

"Ah!"

"Do you finally understand?"

"Could it be that while we were unconscious, someone moved us to the doors locks?"

"Moved me and Tsutsumi-san? Is this possible?"

Hoshī tilted her head and said.

"By a wheelchair or a suitcase, there are as many tools that can be used to move stuff." said Tsutsumi. "In short, it's not difficult to move us to the doors after we fainted. It's just flat and straight corridors along the way."

"Ah, that's why I was sleeping in the smoking room. I was probably given sleeping pills!"

"It was the coffee. Sleeping pills were in the coffee. I was hit on the head because I didn't drink it."

"The locked room isn't a problem at all." The young girl turned her face away, as if thinking about something. "But... why did the chains and padlocks have to be restored deliberately... just to create the illusion of a locked room? Is this the Ultimate Locked Room mystery...?"

"What're you muttering about. And also, who even are you?" Tsutsumi asked the girl again. "On second thought, you look suspicious. You seem to know something about the situation..."

"We'll discuss this later."

"Wait, this won't do. There's a murder in front of us now, yet an unidentified character like you has appeared. How can we just let it slide. According to the circumstances—"

"My name is Kirigiri Kyōko, and I'm a detective."

She said briefly, then passed by Tsutsumi and left Room R.

Tsutsumi hurriedly chased after her.

"Detective? Are you serious about this?"

"It doesn't matter if you don't believe it or not, you can even forget I'm here. But enough about that, can you lend me your phone for a moment?"

"...Phone? You can borrow it, but you can't use it."

Tsutsumi took out a flip phone from his pocket and handed it to Kirigiri. She just glanced at the LCD screen and immediately handed the phone back.

"No signal."

"As I said. The entire interior of the research facility is covered by shielding devices, no signal can be received. In order to conduct research, even radios can't be used, let alone cell phones."

"Research?"

"Details are classified."

"Hmm—, is that so..."

Kirigiri squinted her eyes, showing a somewhat troubled expression.

Such a kid is actually a detective? Really?

Tsutsumi observed Kirigiri with suspicious eyes.

"I just confirmed that the landline in the surveillance room is also not working. We are now in a state where we can't get in touch with the outside world."

"We should be able to get out of the shielding range if we leave this research facility." Hoshī said. "I can go to town and find a convenience store... I should be able to call the police from there, but the trip will take a while."

"Wait." Kirigiri stopped her. "Try to avoid acting alone. The murderer may have not left yet."

"...Ah, that's true. Then let's all go together."

"Before that, should we check Room L? Isn't there another twin? It's better to see if he is safe first."

The person in Room L is the elder brother of the twins, Kyūren Shikon.

Room L, like Room R, is also monitored by surveillance cameras, but the displays are black and there is no footage. The surveillance images are transmitted by wire, so it isn't affected by the shielding devices. This means that either the wiring is broken somewhere, or the cameras are broken...

"Could it be that something happened to Shikon-kun too?"

Tsutsumi said fearfully.

"Since you can't rely on the monitors to confirm, we have to go and see for ourselves."

Hoshī rushed out of the corridor, her white coat fluttering behind her.

Kirigiri and Tsutsumi also followed her to the corridor.

Walking along the straight corridor, they passed through the double door that was open.

All three returned to the fork in the T-shaped hallway.

To the left, there is another double door, and behind it is Room L. However, the double door here is also wrapped with chains, and a padlock with 'B' written on it is hung. Of course, they couldn't do anything to this lock except for a little shake.

"Uhh, 'B' is Hachi's 'Bee', Hachisuka-san."

"He's resting in the auxiliary building, I think. Let's get Nagate-san, who represents 'A', along the way."

Tsutsumi led the way, and the three of them came out of the building together. A cold wind laced with snowflakes greeted them from the deep darkness.

The Twins Ability Development Institute was built in the mountains off the beaten path. The building was originally a psychiatric hospital and a medical facility for isolation and treatment of severely ill patients. However, the hospital closed

more than 20 years ago, and the place became an abandoned hospital that some described as haunted.

After that, someone bought the entire land, and the surrounding area became private and closed to the outside world. Many rumors say that the buildings that were once ruins had been transformed into a suspicious research institute. According to these urban legends, this research institute is a place for conducting secret experiments that are either ethically questionable or highly dangerous.

Now, although this place has the name of the Twin Ability Research Institute, it's still a mystery which organization set up this place and for what purpose, the actual contents of their research are also completely unclear.

The T-shaped building was used for the twins experiment conducted by Tsutsumi and others. For convenience, this building was called the Research Institute. In addition, there is another apartment-like building within the boundaries of this land, which is mainly used for researchers to have a break, sleep, hold meetings, and so on.

"Today we came here at noon. The first experiment ended at 6 PM, and the doors were locked at that time. That's when Hachisuka-san and Nagate-san were off duty."

Tsutsumi explained the ins and outs to Kirigiri on the way to the auxiliary building.

"It's 9:23 PM— that means the crime occurred within almost the three hours between 6 and 9 PM."

"I went to smoke in the smoking room at 6:30."

"Ahh, true, I remember that, but I passed out right after that."

"Me too."

"From this point of view, Hachisuka-san and the other one may also be in danger too... It's possible that they've been rendered unconscious like us."

Everyone passed through the automatic door of the sub-building.

The walls of the commons corridor are lined with room doors, and the nearest room, room 101, is Hachisuka Kamato's. The researchers each borrowed a room, stayed here for a few days, and working on their research as instructed.

Tsutsumi rang the bell to call Hachisuka.

"Who is it?"

There was a response.

He seems to be safe and sound.

"Hachisuka-san, there's a problem, can you please come out."

Hachisuka immediately opened the door.

He is a middle-aged man with gray hair. He seems like he doesn't care about his clothes, the hem of his sweater is unthreaded, there are a lot of hairballs, his hair is as messy as an old mop, and his face with a beard looks like an unmaintained courtyard. His round glasses are quite distinctive.

"Problem? What the hell is going on?"

"So... Kyūren Suō died..."

"Died?"

The person who screamed was not Hachisuka, but another researcher, Nagate Kaoru, who appeared behind him. Although he has reached the age that can be called middle-aged, he looks younger in the suit and tie. He doesn't look like a researcher who is enthusiastic about his work, but more like a shrewd and capable salesman. Despite the winter, his skin is bronze, and it feels like his aesthetic level is high and unique.

"Huh? Why is Nagate-san in Hachisuka-san's room?"

"Oh, because it's too early to go to bed, so I'm having a little meal and some drink with Hachisuka-san."

"So that's how it is. I can explain it to you two together then, which will save us the trouble."

Tsutsumi gave them a brief account of what happened after they were off duty.

Hachisuka and Nagate listened to him openly, but they were suspicious until the end. It's no wonder since they didn't see the situation at the scene.

"Did you call the police?"

"No, it seems that the murderer has cut off our means of communication... Is the phone available here? Please check."

Nagate returned to the room, and then immediately came back.

"Indeed, the phone in the room doesn't work either. Ah, but it's also possible that the phone wasn't working from the beginning. We never checked whether the phone was working before."

Nagate said in a casual tone. Despite the fact that a murder had occurred, he still seems to be relaxed.

"There's no doubt Suō-kun died, right?"

"Yeah, she confirmed it."

Tsutsumi lifted his chin and signaled that 'she' was Kirigiri.

Kirigiri still stood there with an indifferent expression, as if she had been implanted with a clumsy synthesis technique, alone and isolated in this environment. Maybe it's her mysterious temperament that give people this feeling.

"This little girl? Who is she." Nagate looked up and down at Kirigiri. "You guys know her?"

"No... she says she's a detective."

"Detective? Ah, a detective, right. Even children can be detectives nowadays. I wonder whether that's true or not, but no matter what she is, she's an unrelated outsider, right? It should be ok to leave her alone, right?"

"Nah, I also don't know what to do with her... but I don't think she is a dangerous person at least. If she really was Suō-kun's murderer, she wouldn't have woken me up at the time. It would've been better for her to just run away..."

"Let's talk about her afterwards... Now what? Do you think that Shikon-kun might have been killed too? It shouldn't be possible."

"Huh, why do you say that?"

"Think about it. Hachisuka-san and I were off duty at 6 PM, and we both stayed here until this time." Nagate stretched out his index finger. "Aren't Room L and the door in the middle locked?"

"We went to see it, and they are indeed locked." Hoshī said. "That means, there's no way to open the door of Room L."

"Yes, that's right." Nagate smiled without any nervousness. "**The only key in the world was here all the time**, and there is no spare key at all. This means that no one has ever been in or out of Room L."

"Only one fingerprint is registered in each of those locks?"

Kirigiri asked.

"Yes, there are four padlocks. The four of us registered our fingerprints and also made very clear marks on them, which are the letters from 'A' to 'D'."

"We assigned the letters according to the resonance of the name, so it's better to remember."

'A' is Nagate, based on the other pronunciation of 'Naga'.

'B' is Hachisuka, based on 'Hachi's meaning in English being Bee.

'C' is Hoshī, based on the pronunciation of 'Shī'.

'D' is Tsutsumi, based on the other pronunciation of 'Tsutsumi'.

Originally, the pronunciation of Tsutsumi was 'Tei', which really felt more like a 'T', but Tsutsumi specifically chose 'D'. As long as everyone else is clear, it doesn't really matter what the remaining one is.

"How do you register fingerprints? Is there a special machine?"

"No, the padlock itself comes with a reading device and no other machine is needed." Nagate explained. "First, in the unlocked state, turn the lock buckle back 180 degrees and insert it to switch to the fingerprint register mode. After that, just insert your finger into the keyhole of the padlock, once you hear a beep, the fingerprint registration is complete, and you can only use that fingerprint to unlock it next time. These devices are very precise, the authentication failure rate is about 1 out of 250 times. Also, to avoid illegal unlocking, it must be the finger of a living person, otherwise there is no way to pass the authentication."

"Who brought those padlocks?"

"It was here originally, with instructions attached."

"Is it possible that it had been modified? For example, before you newly register, there were other fingerprints registered there to begin with that could be used as a master key."

"I don't think so, although I have no basis for saying that. However, if this is the case, the murderer is using their fingerprint as the master key. This is a very important evidence, It's literally a key to reveal the truth, I doubt they'd do something that easy to trace."

"Hey, everyone, let's go to Room L first, alright? I think we should first fully grasp the current situation."

Hoshī said with a bit of impatience.

"Hoshī-san is right, it's useless for us to discuss what's inside the box before it's opened." Hachisuka took a little effort to stand up and walked out the door slowly. "Then let's go."

With the addition of Hachisuka and Nagate, there are five people in total this time, and the group returned to the Research Institute.

Everyone passed through the entrance of the Research Institute and first came to the surveillance room.

The monitors are still showing footage of Room R, and one of the cameras showed a magnified image of Kyūren Suō.

Seeing that screen, Hachisuka and Nagate finally understood the current situation.

"Is this some kind of bad prank? This kind of mischief was an everyday occurrence in the **Bubble Economy** times."

Nagate reluctantly pulled a smile and said, he probably wanted to lighten the atmosphere with a joke.

"It doesn't look like a dream or an illusion, at least." said Hachisuka, pushing his round-rimmed glasses. "But, because of this, we have to find the formula for the truth. So, *some of you have watched the security footage already, right?*"

"Ah, that's right!" Hoshī immediately got in front of the display's operation panel. "Maybe the murderer who killed Suō-kun was filmed in the recording!"

Under the operation of Hoshī, the saved recording got displayed on the monitor.

"The problem starts after 6:30, rewind to that time first."

Tsutsumi issued instructions.

The time in the lower right corner of the screen displayed a 18:30.

The scene was recorded from various angles and can be switched between various ones at will. At that time, Kyūren Suō in the footage was sleeping on the bed wrapped in the quilt, nothing unusual.

The problem occurred at 19:02.

The surveillance camera is located above the entrance of the room. From the image overlooking the interior, a white shadow entered the frame from below.

It looks like the back of a person with a white hood on his head. That person walked from the front of the frame to the far end of the room. From the back of the head, back, and then the waist, entered the frame. The person is white all over, and looks like they are covered with a whole piece of cloth from head to toe. Suō, who was sleeping on the bed, did not notice them.

The intruder turned their back to the camera, so no one could see their face in the video, and the white cloth is the only part that

could be seen when switching to other cameras. These cameras were originally set up to surveil Suō, so people coming in from the entrance were not filmed at all.

"It should be this. The intruder entered Suō-kun's room after opening the locked doors."

Nagate said, with his arms crossed.

"Sure enough, they opened the locked doors and broke into the room when Hoshī and I were unconscious."

Tsutsumi whispered.

In the footage, the intruder approached the bed.

They finally appeared in the footage with their whole body.

However, because the white cloth covered them completely from head to toe, even their figure couldn't be seen. For comparison, they look like a ghost with a bed sheet over their head, and their actions inexplicably have a kind of ghostly feeling. Maybe it's due to the effect of the number of video frames.

The ghost finally stood in front of the bed.

Suō was still unaware.

The result spoke for itself—

Everyone in front of the monitor couldn't help but gulp.

The ghost extended their right hand and held it high.

In that hand is a knife.

The knife swung down.

Only one stab.

Kyūren Suō, lying on his back, made a slight curling motion, as if he had exhausted his strength, and soon stopped moving.

The ghost released the knife.

The knife, like a tombstone, got vertically stuck on the quilt.

The blood stains on the quilt began to expand gradually.

After the ghost finished the job, they finally turned their head around.

They have no face.

It was a mask.

Where there should be a face was a mask.

The mask is white, flat, and looks like an ordinary oval plate. However, when looking closely, there are three black dots on the mask. The position of the three black dots is an inverted triangle, indicating the eyes and mouth. Although there are only three dots, this mask doesn't look like a human face. Because it's so simple, it wasn't scary anymore, and it's even a bit comical.

The masked ghost was about to leave the room.

The ghost stopped at the door for a moment, and looked up at the camera.

Everyone present felt like they were looking at the creepy mask, and their bodies gave a shudder. Even Kirigiri, who had been calm before, got pale and speechless.

The masked ghost disappeared from frame casually after that.

The time displayed is 19:04.

"...Are there any signs that the video had been processed?"

Hachisuka broke the silence and asked.

"We won't know until we analyze the data... but there is no sign of the video device being tampered with."

Looking under the table where the monitor is placed, there is a shelf with a glass door on which is placed a large rectangular machine, which is the hard disk drive for the surveillance video.

"If you want to tamper with surveillance videos, you have to pull out this machine and plug in the wiring on the back of the interface. But, because the cable is very short, if you want to pull out the machine, the wiring on it will fall off. The surveillance video will be temporarily interrupted. But the previous video has no trace of interruption, so it should be logically said that 'the video has no signs of being processed'."

Tsutsumi explained it like that, Hachisuka and Nagate nodded in agreement at the same time.

"Ah." Hoshī, who was checking the shelf where the hard drive was placed, called out. "Two of the four drives aren't powered on."

These are Room L's drives. The socket cords for the plugs have been cut."

"That's why the screens are black."

The signals of the surveillance cameras are received through the hard drives, so after a drive is powered off, the picture is of course interrupted.

"It seems that the footage can be restored by repairing the cord or by unplugging and replacing it. Should I restore the surveillance of Room L?"

Hoshī asked.

"Hmm—, isn't it faster for us to go to Room L? It seems necessary to check with our own eyes anyway." Nagate said. "So, let's go to Room L."

Everyone left the surveillance room together.

"The murderer being in disguise means that they acted with the knowledge of surveillance cameras. That mask does not suit my generation's preferences—"

Walking down the corridor, Nagate opened his arms and said calmly.

"At least the murderer went to the monitoring room and knocked out Tsutsumi-san there before attacking Suō-san, so he must have also known that Room R was under surveillance."

Hoshī walked quickly down the corridor, her white coat floating up.

"Then again, since the murderer put sleeping pills in the coffee, they must be someone familiar with the internal situation." said Hachisuka with an odd smile. "The murderer is either one of us, or— it was **Ashvins**."

"Ashvins?"

Kirigiri asked.

"They're the leader of this research team. The person who claims to be Ashvins prepared this research institute and gave instructions on the content of the research. We were called here by that person."

Tsutsumi explained.

"In other words, there is a fifth researcher besides you?"

"That's right... Having said that, they are not here, probably. They have never shown themselves." Nagate said with an exaggerated shrug. "We really did fall for their trick, I thought something was fishy at first. They sent a black envelope with materials related to the research, offering me to participate if I'm interested enough. And that I can get 3 millions just by participating. So I couldn't help but come."

"What kind of research?"

"The details cannot be circulated— but to put it simply, it's a twin experiment." Tsutsumi began to explain. "The study of twins is an important subject in the fields of sociology and psychology, especially the study of identical twins with identical genetics is

very valuable research data that can help us figure out exactly what social and genetic factors are involved in human growth."

"This kind of experiment in which twins are locked in small rooms and then sealed from the outside is a common research?"

Kirigiri stared at Tsutsumi with cold eyes.

"W-well... we were just following Ashvins's instructions..."

Tsutsumi didn't know how to answer, and it happened that they have arrived at the destination, so Tsutsumi said vaguely and let it go.

The door in front of them is locked by the 'B' padlock and chains.

"Yup, it still does have a lock on it." Hachisuka said, pointing to the padlock. "Let me make it clear in advance that Nagate and I never left our room in the sub-building after the 6 PM break, and had never entered the Research Institute. We can testify to each other."

"Although I drank a little bit of alcohol, it wasn't enough to cause memory loss, and we didn't fall asleep either."

Nagate added.

"Alright, please hurry up and open the door."

"Okay, okay, Hoshī-san, you're really impatient."

Hachisuka didn't rush, and finally unlocked the padlock.

"Both Hachisuka-san and Nagate-san are too slow. This is a life-threatening matter. Do you even understand that."

Hoshī quickly removed the padlock.

The group put the unlocked padlock and chains in place and went to Room L.

Room L also has an anteroom, which is divided into a room with a bed and a room for surveillance. Inside the locked door should be the elder brother of the twins, Kyūren Shikon.

"Hey— Shikon-kun, are you okay?"

Tsutsumi knocked on the door and shouted.

No response.

"Out of the way, I'll open the door immediately—"

Nagate wanted to unlock the padlock.

However, this time Kirigiri stopped him.

"Wait, let's check what's inside before opening the door."

"That's what you said before. What's the point of that?" Tsutsumi asked. "Times like this are all about a race against time..."

"There is a form among locked room killings known as 'quick kill'. Simply put, it's the act of killing quickly after the locked room is opened. Although the victim is in a completely closed room, they aren't dead yet; after the room opens, the murderer pretends to find the body, and then at that time they carry out the murder. The characteristic of this technique is that the strength of the locked room can reach its limit. To give an example, it can even make the body appear in a box that's completely sealed with

chains. **To a certain extent, it can be said that this form is the Ultimate Locked Room.**"

"That's why... so you're being so careful not to let this kind of 'quick kill' happen."

Hachisuka adjusted the position of his round glasses and said.

Kirigiri nodded.

"Then let's first look at the situation inside from next door."

Hoshī opened the door and went in first by herself.

"Kyaa!"

There was a scream.

Kirigiri, Nagate, Tsutsumi, and Hachisuka also followed her into the room.

The structure of this room is no different from the one seen in Room R. It's a long and narrow space, with a long table and iron bars chairs, and a camera set on a tripod. But the huge one-way mirror is inlaid on the wall on the left hand side, symmetrical to Room R.

Hoshī dropped on the ground and pointed inside the one-way mirror.

Through the one-way mirror, the scene in the white room is unobstructed.

In the white light of the fluorescent lights, the white colored floor and walls appeared more and more snowy white, as if the whole

room is glowing white, this strange scene really had little sense of reality.

The out-of-place color stung everyone's eyes.

Inside the quilt slept twin brother Kyūren Shikon, yet one look at him was enough to confirm that he is dead. His body is stiff, and he is staring at the mirror with his eyes open.

Tsutsumi began to knock on the one-way mirror. If he is alive, he should react to sounds and vibrations.

However, Shikon did not move.

"Let's go in and see."

Nagate went out.

Kirigiri and Hachisuka followed him.

Tsutsumi and Hoshī didn't move, staring straight into the one-way mirror.

"It's different from Suō-kun's in Room R... No knife."

Hoshī said in a trembling voice.

"Indeed, although the method of death looks exactly the same..."

In the center of the red marks on the quilt, there is a small hole, where the murderer must have inserted the murder weapon.

However, at a glance, there is nothing resembling a murder weapon on the ground, maybe the murderer took it away.

The two were looking into the next room when the door suddenly opened and Nagate and others entered the room. The first person

to enter the room was Kirigiri. She ordered the others to stand still at the door, and then checked Shikon's breathing and pulse to confirm that he is dead.

"It should be safe to assume that he was killed at about the same time as the victim in Room R." Kirigiri's voice came through the one-way mirror. "No murder weapon found... but it appears that he died from being stabbed in the chest with a sharp object, no other external injuries."

"Strange, that's impossible." Nagate said, looking a little flustered for the first time. "He was alive when we locked up, and we heard him joking with us through the window. He was alive at that time. So how..."

"There's a vent here, but a person can't get in and out through that." Hachisuka said while looking up. "To get in and out of this room, there is no other way than to open the entrance door. But we are the only ones who can open the locks."

"B-but, I have never set foot outside the sub-building, you should know that very well, right? Hachisuka-san."

"Yeah... I can confirm this, which is why I'm so confused now. Who did it and how..."

Kirigiri ignored the two distraught men and investigated around the room. She stood in front of the one-way mirror and opened her arms, as if measuring the size of the mirror. This one-way mirror is about 3 meters wide and about 1 meter long. Her serious face expression could be seen through the one-sided mirror.

"Let's go, there is nothing more to investigate here."

Kirigiri left the room.

Nagate and Hachisuka watched her leave dumbfounded, then snapped back and hurried out of the room.

"Let's... go too."

Hoshī finally stood up and left the room with Tsutsumi.

The five people met in the front hall.

"What the hell is going on?" Tsutsumi pressed Kirigiri. "We can still think of a possibility on Room R's side because we got knocked out, but there is absolutely no way here. Nagate-san and Hachisuka-san have been together. They have an alibi, and of course they didn't faint. No matter what, the murderer shouldn't have been able to break into Room L!"

"True."

Kirigiri said lightly.

"That's right..."

Tsutsumi suddenly lost his momentum and became speechless.

"Sure enough, it was Ashvins who registered their fingerprint in the padlocks as the master key in advance. I've decided to believe this explanation." Nagate raised his hands like a surrender.

"Everything was prearranged. They called us here to frame us, and they were the one who drugged the coffee. That's right, the murderer is Ashvins!"

"Hold up." Hachisuka raised his hand to stop him. "If they have the master key, they should also be able to open the doors of Room R easily, wouldn't that make it unnecessary to specifically knock out Tsutsumi-san and Hoshī-san?"

"Well, that... could it be that they were unconscious not to unlock the doors, but to temporarily stop surveillance? If the murder was carried out under surveillance, it would've been very likely that they would be caught immediately. To kill the two twin brothers, the murderer came up with a foolproof plan so that they wouldn't be interrupted in the middle of it—"

"Assuming that Ashvins is the murderer, why did they purposely get us here before killing the twins...?" Tsutsumi murmured and organized his words. "It's as if they wanted us to see the murders happen, which is too strange. Wouldn't it make more sense to kill someone secretly and then find a place to bury them in the mountains..."

"This means the logic of a lunatic has nothing to do with reason of ordinary people."

Nagate concluded so.

He seems to have thought that the mysterious person Ashvins is the murderer.

"About this Ashvins." Kirigiri said. "Has anyone met them directly? Did you communicate with them through documents or emails and the like?"

"Y-yeah... it's true that none of us have ever met Ashvins or heard their voice."

Tsutsumi replied.

"Nagate-san said just now, the letter you received was black, right? Was that the same with others?"

"It was pure black!" Hoshī said. "Although I thought the letter was weird, I was very short on money... Twin research would also allow me to learn something and thought it was perfect so I came all the way here..."

"That's their usual tactic."

Kirigiri said, holding her arms.

"Their?"

"Crime Victims' Relief Committee, a criminal organization with strong financial and organizational power. They instigate those who have a desire for revenge to commit murder, design the killing process into the form of a game, and offer it as an entertainment program."

"Baha, what the hell? Is this whatever whatever committee belonging to some kind of urban legend... or a conspiracy theory."

Nagate laughed from his nose and said.

"It's no wonder that you don't believe it, you can think so at first if you want." Kirigiri's countered without an expression change.

"But don't forget, the fact of the matter now is that two people have already been killed."

"Then the person who claims to be Ashvins is a member of that criminal organization. They created the locked room to give the murders a game-like nature?"

Hachisuka said, stroking the stubble on his chin.

"It's a bit different. Ashvins is not a member of the organization, but a challenger in the game. They were also thrown into the game by the organization. And in that aspect, they are the same as us. The difference is that they were given the role of the 'murderer'. What the organization has prepared is this location and the killing technique, the challenger has to use these to complete the killing and escape the detective within a week to be considered a victory, that's the rules of the game."

"Uh-huh, I see... So it's like... this locked room is the murderer's 'exam'."

"H-hey, Hachisuka-san, you believe what she is saying?"

Tsutsumi asked in surprise.

"Whether we believe it or not, we have never considered the problem from this perspective. Her statement is sufficient to explain the current absurd situation, so I accept it."

"I- I agree." Hoshī said, raising her hand. "It's hard to imagine that the absurd and ridiculous thing she just said is something she made up off the top of her head. This little girl may have experienced this kind of game in the past and dealt with the same incident several times before, correct?"

Kirigiri nodded slightly.

"It's so easy for you guys to believe in others. What if we think of it like this? **This little girl is Ashvins.**" Nagate said with one finger to Kirigiri. "I don't know if the thing about that criminal organization is true or not, but in any case, if you consider her as Ashvins, it makes sense in every aspect. Apart from the four of us who received the letters, no one else knew that the twins research was going on here, but somehow an outsider like her was able to sneak in. and she looks like she knows the inside story. Who else could do this kind of thing besides the host, Ashvins, who invited us here?"

"Hmm... indeed..."

Tsutsumi secretly glanced at Kirigiri's expression.

However, she was unmoved.

Is she really a detective?

If she isn't a detective, then what is she?

"But... she looks like a child, isn't she?" Tsutsumi retorted cautiously. "From the letters sent by Ashvins, it's at least clear that they have professional knowledge about the twin research, which is not something that middle school students or high school students can grasp. And... I don't think she can prepare these research facilities alone."

"Yeah— she should have some support, maybe it's that whatever committee. In short, the criminal organization really exists, but she is the challenger herself. How about this, Hachisuka-san, I don't think there's anything lacking in my logic."

"Then how do you explain the locked room murders?"

"As I said earlier, her fingerprints are registered as a master key."

"The idea of the master key was originally proposed by her, and the criminal organization was also the information provided by her. If she is really the murderer, then why did she reveal herself like this?"

"We'll know if we confirm it, if her fingerprints are really registered, then one of her fingers should be able to unlock it."

Nagate picked up the padlock that had fallen on the side.

'A' is written on the padlock.

He buckled the lock and handed it to Kirigiri.

"Okay, please insert your fingers into the keyhole, and try all ten fingers in order. This is the 'Mouth of Truth', it won't bite your hand off, but if you're really the murderer, the lock should get open."

Kirigiri, who had been expressionless until then, finally showed a faint one of defiance.

"Come on, hurry up."

"I don't want to."

"Huh? What did you say?"

"I said no."

A thin wrinkle formed between Kirigiri's eyebrows, and her face was turned away.

"Hey, do you have any idea what kind of position you're in right now?" Tsutsumi raised his voice. "Since you're not the murderer, just stick your fingers in and prove that you aren't. Can't you do that?"

"It's not that I can't do it, it's that I don't want to."

"...Why?" Nagate grinned. "Can I consider this a surrender on your part?"

"I'm not the murderer."

"So just prove it." Hachisuka approached Kirigiri. "As long as you prove here that you are not the murderer, you'll avoid any other unnecessary arguments, isn't that right?"

"If you don't, then we'll just have to do it the hard way, eh?"

Nagate moved closer to her.

Kirigiri sighed helplessly.

".....Ok."

She spread her thin fingers in front of her body.

Her fingers are so slender that she can't even play a musical instrument, let alone work as a detective. Is such a high class little lady girl really a detective...

Kirigiri started with the index finger of her right hand, and inserted each finger into the padlock keyhole in Nagate's hand in turn.

Tsutsumi and the others kept silent and watched this strange ritual.

Including the thumb, the padlock did not respond to the fingers of her right hand.

Next, Kirigiri inserted the fingers of her left hand into the keyhole one by one.

The ritual took less than three minutes to end.

The padlock remained locked.

"Is this satisfactory?"

Kirigiri squinted her eyes and looked back at Nagate.

"Hey Nagate-san, you must admit it." Tsutsumi interrupted from the side. "The one who claims to be Ashvins is someone else."

"No, that's not enough."

"Huh? What else..."

"There are still fingers that haven't been checked."

Nagate pointed at Kirigiri's feet.

"*Toes?* How is that possible..."

"Well, she expected this situation in advance, so she deliberately didn't use her fingers, but used her toes to register her fingerprint. This should've been what she thought."

"That's why I don't want to."

Kirigiri whispered.

"Eh?"

"I don't want to."

"By now you have no right to refuse. go on, take off your shoes."

Kirigiri took a few steps back, showing a rejection attitude towards Nagate's request.

"Ah, hey, no running away."

Tsutsumi grabbed Kirigiri's wrist.

In the next instant, his vision completely flipped over.

Tsutsumi had somehow ended up lying on his back, looking up at Kirigiri.

What happened?

It's like some strange trick was used, and for a moment his body felt like it floated in the air...

"Woah, awesome." Hachisuka clapped his hands and cheered.

"Was that Aikido just now? What an eye-opener. I believe she is a detective now."

"No no, even then it doesn't make the logic that she's not Ashvins valid. She may be both a detective and Ashvins, we can confirm otherwise only after proving that her toes cannot open the padlock."

Nagate persisted.

However, he kept a certain distance from Kirigiri, and doesn't know what would happen to him if he approaches Kirigiri.

"Hey little girl, why don't you want to?" Hoshī bent down to make her eye level with Kirigiri. "Try it as before and it will be over soon, right?"

"...It's embarrassing."

Kirigiri showed an expression that seemed to be both angry and unwilling, then her eyes drooped. Maybe this is her embarrassed expression.

"Embarrassed?"

Tsutsumi rubbed his pained back and stood up.

The men headed by Tsutsumi were puzzled.

"I see..." Hoshī said, seeming to understand something. "Then I'll witness you, so let's go to the room over there to check, okay, little girl?"

"That's fine."

"I'll check carefully."

Hoshī took nagate's padlock and Kirigiri into the surveillance room with her.

Tsutsumi and the others looked at each other as if they were not sure about the situation.

"Is this the so-called girl's heart?"

"Who knows.....?"

After about 5 minutes, Hoshī and Kirigiri came out of the room. Looking at Kirigiri's feet, she has the shoes and socks all neatly on.

Kirigiri looked as if she had overcome her difficulties and had done it all.

"Didn't unlock, she is not Ashvins."

Hoshī said. The padlock remained shackled.

"Is that right? Did you double check?"

"Nagate-san, are you even suspicious of me?" Hoshī said displeased. "I checked all the toes carefully."

"Alriiight, I was wrong." Nagate exaggeratedly raised his hands and shook his head. "She's clean."

"Then it's your turn now."

Kirigiri took the padlock, a small smile appeared at the corner of her mouth, and stopped in front of Tsutsumi and the others. She passed the padlock over as if she was holding up a gun.

"Everyone present, please try all your fingers and toes."

"Do you think Ashvins is among us?"

Tsutsumi asked.

"Who knows, It's hard to say."

Kirigiri did not say more.

"Alright fine, then I'll go first..."

Tsutsumi put his fingers into the keyhole.

The fingers of both hands were all tried, and the padlock did not open.

"...Feet too?"

"Yes, I'll give you the lock, try it yourself."

Kirigiri threw the padlock to Tsutsumi.

After that, Tsutsumi tried the toes of both feet, but failed to open the lock. Because the big toe couldn't fit into the keyhole, it was excluded, since it can't be inserted into the keyhole, it's naturally impossible to register.

Next, Hachisuka and Hoshī tried all the fingers and toes in turn, but the lock still didn't open.

Finally Nagate took the padlock.

"Wait, you don't have to try."

The Kirigiri stopped him.

"Eh, why?"

"The 'A' padlock is already registered with your fingerprint."

"Oh, right."

Nagate inserted his registered right index finger into the keyhole, and the lock opened.

"Looks like the lock isn't broken."

"What you should try is the 'B' padlock in the hallway, no objections?"

"No objections, princess."

Nagate said in a playful tone, and shrugged.

Everyone left the room together, went to the corridor, and opened the double door on the way. The chain and padlock had fallen on the ground, Nagate picked up the lock, and tried his fingers and toes just like everyone else. Like the others, his big toes couldn't be inserted into the keyhole, and the other fingers and toes didn't open the lock.

Finally, after Hachisuka inserted the registered finger into the lock hole, the lock opened normally.

"This cleared things up, Ashvins is not among us."

Tsutsumi said.

"It's hard to say. This experiment merely proves that 'none of us has registered a master key'. However, *if the master key is not required to create the locked rooms*, it doesn't matter whether the padlock can be opened or not."

"Creating the locked rooms without a master key? that's impossible!" Nagate said, spreading his arms dramatically. "You saw it too, Room L was tightly locked with chains and padlocks. It's impossible to open the doors without opening the padlocks. No matter what, the only possibility is that a master key was set."

"Is that so?"

Kirigiri only responded vaguely.

The group decided to return to the surveillance room first, and then walked again.

"Speaking of which, there was no murder weapon found in Shikon-kun's room, can we consider that the murderer took it away."

Hachisuka was talking to no one in particular.

"That should be the case." Nagate responded lightly. "It's tempting to suspect suicide in such a tightly locked room, but now at least this possibility can be ruled out. If it was suicide, the murder weapon would've definitely stayed in the crime scene."

"Suicide...? Right!" Tsutsumi suddenly thought of something and called out. "**It's suicide.** That should explain it logically."

"But—, didn't I just say—? If it's suicide, where did the murder weapon go? He can't take it away after his death—?"

"For example, how about this, **he stabbed himself with a knife made of ice—**"

"Rejected!" Nagate vetoed it in a second. "You don't want to add a side note to what you just said, do you? A weapon made of ice is like thinking a **Walkman** is more of a gramophone than a portable music device, right?"

"What does this level of thinking have to do with the actual case? The gramophone can still play as long as it's not broken!"

Tsutsumi could not hide his mood swing, his voice shaking a little.

"If you start thinking that Shikon-kun committed suicide, then Suō-kun's death can also be explained."

"What do you mean? Let's hear it."

Hachisuka said.

"Th-thank you. Uhh, that's... I just wanted to say... **the weird person in white who appeared in Room R could be Shikon-kun from Room L.** The older brother of the twins killed his younger brother and committed suicide, by a heart-to-heart. That is the structure of the murders that took place in this institute. The reason why the monitor in Room L was made a black screen was to prevent us from seeing the scene of Shikon-kun committing suicide after returning to the room."

"Why would anyone carry out this absurd behavior?"

"This... I'm not sure... I think it was a sign of contempt for us. In their opinion, we're just a group of despicable scientific researchers who wantonly fiddle with the twins as research materials. The ones who called us here are also them. Yes, they were Ashvins. As you probably know, Ashvins is the name of the twin gods in Hindu mythology, and wouldn't that name suit these perpetrators?"

"Uh-huh, it makes sense so far— It's not impossible." Hachisuka said, pushing his round glasses. "But the issue of the locked room hasn't been solved at all. Even if the strange man in white was Shikon-kun, how did he get in and out of Room L? And besides, we were the ones who locked him in Room L, even if he was Ashvins. And registered his fingerprint on the padlocks as the master key, **he wouldn't be able to touch the padlock outside the door at all while he was locked indoors.**"

"Ah, yeah... you're right. Then there should be a secret passage in Room L..."

"A murder weapon made of ice followed by a secret passage? Don't get me wrong, I'm actually a big fan of secret passages, but it's unlikely this time— right, detective lady?"

Regarding Nagate's question, Kirigiri didn't answer, but stared into the distance.

"In the end, if we don't solve the mystery of the locked room, we won't know who the murderer is."

Hoshī whispered haggardly.

"The mystery of the locked room— It's indeed a leak-proof locked room." said Hachisuka, touching the beard on his chin. "But I have an idea to solve the mystery of this secret room..."

"An idea?"

"Yes, **the Ultimate Locked Room technique that only the twins can do.**"

"What Ultimate Locked Room technique, speaking so exaggeratedly again."

Nagate said sarcastically.

"No, I can assert that if it succeeded, then it should be the Ultimate Locked Room technique without a doubt. Haven't you guys thought of it yet? Since you are all studying twins, you should be able to think of it."

"Ahhh, is that what happened!" Nagate seemed to think of something. "Huh, I didn't expect one to use that to create a locked room mystery..."

"Huh? What's that? Refresh me a bit..."

Hoshī was a little panicked.

"It's 'The Corsican Brothers'. Everyone has heard of them, at least as far as rumors go. It's the special induction that occurs between identical twins. It's said that a twin knows what the other twin is thinking even if they are far apart. They can also feel each other's feelings, and it's not just that, sometimes they can even sense each other's pain. When one of the twins fracture their right hand, the other twin in another place also say that they felt pain in their right hand at the same time. In more unusual cases, where one of them is cut and the other one also gets an itch in the same area."

"Huh? Isn't this the experiment we're conducting here?"

"Hey, Hoshī." Tsutsumi hurried to cover her mouth. "The contents of the research is kept secret."

"Ah, sorry."

"No, I think it's better not to hide anything more from this detective lady. That's right, just like what Hoshī-san said, we planned to attempt 'The Corsican Brothers' experiment here. As we just said, 'The Corsican Brothers' refers to **a special kind of twins who share an illness or physical trauma**. The name comes

from a novel written in the 19th century, which means that the phenomenon was recognized more than 100 years ago."

"In the black letter sent by Ashvins, there was a file of the Kyūren Brothers attached." said Tsutsumi, with a tone that sounded like he was confessing his crime, and explained to Kirigiri. "The letter stated that they were particularly capable of **exerting a strong sense of induction especially in trauma**. We intended to use them to carry out 'The Corsican Brothers' experiment. Of course, this experiment was carried out in accordance with Ashvins's instructions... but it would be a lie to say that I personally had no interest in it."

Kirigiri kept listening to their confession, she maintained her cold expression. Maybe she is angry after knowing the contents of the experiment, or she is not interested in it, in one ear and out the other. She wouldn't let the feelings of her heart show in her expressions.

"To briefly explain the contents of the experiment, it's to isolate the Kyūren Brothers in Rooms L and R, and use a needle to stimulate the arm of one of them, the older or younger brother, as long as the other person can sense the stimulation, the experiment would be successful. Do you think this experiment is useless? Well, if this phenomenon can be applied, it would be a 'Perfect Cryptographic Communication Technique', signals wouldn't need to be transmitted and received through radio waves or satellites."

Tsutsumi talked with excitement, he then took a deep breath and exhaled it slowly to calm himself down, probably because he suddenly realized he was getting a bit emotional.

"However, today our experiment didn't go that far. We only did very common twin induction experiments, the more preliminary kind, like having them choose the same **ESP card**, drawing on sketchbooks, and so on."

"Locking them up was also part of the experiment, right?"

"Yes, it's to prevent cheating. I have participated in many experiments with twins that are said to be extrasensory, but were fake. They all discussed and agreed on the drawing order of the cards in advance. What's more. Some twins were also experimented on while talking on tiny radios. In order to prevent this kind of cheating from happening, we've taken additional measures to lock the two rooms with chains and padlocks so that they cannot come and go freely. The shielding device is also part of the experiment."

"It's divided into four locks, and the fingerprints of different people were registered to prevent some of the researchers from colluding with the twins." Nagate explained. "For example, If I were to cheat, and planned to approach the twins, I would be blocked by Hachisuka-san's lock. Chains and padlocks served this purpose."

"But this happened to play a major role in creating the Ultimate Locked Room, which is really ironic." Hachisuka said in a low voice pretentiously. "By this point you should understand that the

Ultimate Locked Room is the room that makes use of 'The Corsican Brothers' phenomenon. First, in order to enter Room R, the murderer broke through the padlock barriers by knocking out Tsutsumi-san and Hoshī-san. Then, just like in the surveillance video, the murderer put on a white cloth and a mask, and directly killed Suō-kun. The murder there wasn't a locked room murder. However, at the same time, Room L had formed the Ultimate Locked Room. **At the moment when the murderer assassinated Suō-kun, Shikon-kun in Room L also suffered a fatal stabbing in his chest.** This is the answer to the locked room."

Hachisuka made this assertion and closed his mouth.

As if to say, this is the conclusion, nothing else to say—

Tsutsumi and the others came to the surveillance room. Several iron pipe chairs are placed side by side, but no one went to sit on them. The body of Kyūren Suō in the monitor still kept facing the camera, as if trying to say something.

"So... everybody, it's okay to stay here, but isn't it better to call the police as soon as possible?"

Hoshī said. In the debate so far, it was the most normal and constructive opinion.

"That's right... Although things may become very troublesome, it would be best to be honest about the experiments conducted here, after that it will be left to the police."

Tsutsumi took the phone out of his pocket and looked at the screen, but it still showed no signal.

"We should be able to use mobile phones after we leave the scope of the institute." Hoshī said. "For safety, let's all go together."

Kirigiri was the first to object to the proposal.

"I'll take care of contacting the police, you guys should wait here."

"Uhhh, that won't do, young lady. Didn't you say that the murderer can be outside and dangerous. the mystery of the locked room has been solved yes, but the murderer hasn't been caught..."

"No problem."

"That's not how it works, you know. You have to be obedient." Nagate said. "As mature adults, we can't let you, an underage girl, go out alone at night."

"Well, how about this, I'll go with her." Tsutsumi suggested. "It's relatively safer to get out of the shielding range in my car."

"Yeah— that's right... Then let's split up. Tsutsumi and little detective will go outside to call the police. While I guard here to prevent anyone from approaching the murder scene."

"Okay. Hey, little detective, is this all right? By the way, you didn't bring your phone at all, did you?"

Tsutsumi asked, and Kirigiri nodded quietly.

"Umm, what about me...?"

"Hoshī, you stay here, too." said Tsutsumi. "It's just a phone call, not many people are needed."

"Okay."

"I'm staying here too." Hachisuka waved his hand. "My back pain got way worse recently, It'd just be a time waste if I went out, bahaha."

"Please be careful!"

Hoshī's voice sent Tsutsumi and Kirigiri out of the surveillance room.

The two came out of the research building, crossed the gravel road, and came to the parking lot. The place doesn't even have decent night lights, and they had to rely on the mobile phone's backlight. The remote control key wasn't working, and the car had to be found in the dark, probably because this area of the Research Institute is affected by the shielding.

"Found it." Tsutsumi finally found his car and opened the door.

"The shielding coverage seems to be quite wide... Come on, get in the car."

Tsutsumi got into the driver's seat.

Kirigiri sat in the back seat.

"I'm handing over the cell phone to you. You look at the signal and call the police once you can get through."

Tsutsumi handed the phone to Kirigiri behind him, fastened his seat belt, and screwed in the key.

The headlights of the car lit up in the dark forest.

"May I ask something."

"What's up?"

Tsutsumi replied, he didn't look back.

"I'd like to know something about the events leading up to the incident. Who was the first person to come to this institute?"

"It's Hoshī, she said it herself. She said she came by taxi. After that, Nagate-san and Hachisuka-san, I was the last one. I drove here."

Tsutsumi stepped on the accelerator.

In the deadly silence where all life seems to be completely extinct, the sound of the car engine and tires running over sand and gravel is echoing across the night sky. Thick dark clouds covering it, and no star in sight.

"What does this have to do with the incident?"

"Hard to say."

"Hey hey, you're so perfunctory... I've been wondering for a long time, but are you really a detective?"

"This matter is irrelevant."

"Good grief." Tsutsumi shrugged exaggeratedly, letting Kirigiri in the back seat see. "You're a little kid, so I won't bother with you, but you better fix that snobby attitude of yours. You can't complain about being mistaken for a criminal, even if it's only because of a misunderstanding. By the way, shouldn't detectives value the relationship of trust with their clients as a priority?"

"You are not the client."

"Oh, I see."

"How were the twins experiments conducted?"

"As I said earlier, all were done in accordance with the instructions of the person who is claiming to be Ashvins, with the purpose of conducting 'The Corsican Brothers' experiment. As you know, it's impossible to say that this experiment does not involve ethical issues. , So— the research team leader is anonymous, the Research Institute is located in the mountains, the pay is very generous, all kinds of suspicious things can be explained by the reason of 'this is a secret experiment'. But, come to think of it, this deal was too good to be true."

"Why were you selected to be one of the researchers?"

"Who knows, maybe they just picked a few of those who seem to be short on money among people who are studying topics like that. But, even though I'm just an insignificant researcher, Hachisuka-san is well known in the field of twin research. To be honest, I even thought at first that the name Ashvins was the pseudonym used by Hachisuka-san when he was conducting that kind of shady experiments."

The headlights illuminate the winding road downhill. The night road is very cold with no street lights and no oncoming traffic.

"So today, at noon on January 11th, you started the experiment when everyone gathered?"

"Yeah."

"Did the Kyūren brothers know the contents of the experiment?"

"Of course, they had the same files we got from Ashvins, which means that they participated in the experiment with consent to the contents of the experiment. They should've also been paid accordingly."

"And then, did the shared pain and trauma experiment succeed?"

"The experiment didn't reach that stage. We planned to let them adapt little by little, and officially start after about three days. Today we only did some very common twin experiments, like drawing cards, telepathy experiments, and so on."

"I want to ask your opinion as an expert. Do you think it makes sense that the 'Corsican Brothers' phenomenon was used in creating the locked room."

"I'm not really an expert... But if you ask someone who has more or less been involved in twin research, **as long as the twins are genuine, it is possible.** That is, as long as they really have the ability to share pain and trauma... By the way, they got high scores in the ESP cards experiment. There is still a need to scrutinize the results afterwards, it's fair to say that on the surface the twins possess extremely high sensory abilities."

"Is that so, that's helpful."

"Oh right, how's the phone?"

"Still no signal."

"Really? We've been driving down the mountain for a long time."

"There's no signal in this area, right?"

"Yeah, so in the end, we still have to get to the city."

"Today's experiment ended at 6 PM. At that time, the doors were locked with chains and padlocks from the outside, right?"

"Yeah."

"Which one was locked first?"

"The door of Room L. It's 'A' according to the alphabet. That's right, Nagate-san also said that when the lock was put on, Shikon-kun was alive. His voice came from the room, and his activity was captured on the monitor afterwards. Then 'B' was put on after 'A'."

"Do you remember who put the chains on, and who padlocked it?"

"...Uh, it's Nagate-san, wasn't it... No, it's Hoshī, she said 'let me do it' and made sure to wrap the chains around and around, since she's a pretty impatient person and can't sit still if she isn't doing something."

"She did both 'A' and 'B'?"

"Yeah."

The darkness is stretched forward like a long tunnel, with no artificial light source in sight, giving the illusion of sinking towards the very bottom of darkness...

"The next one to be locked is of course 'D' in Room R, right?"

"Yeah, 'C' followed."

"Who was the one who put the chains and padlocks?"

"It was all Hoshī. Speaking of which, Hoshī was also operating the surveillance monitors..."

"Did you witness anything when you were hit in the back of the head?"

"No... I unfortunately didn't see anything. I was on the floor when I woke up. That bastard came down hard on me, but luckily I got my life back. Did they show mercy because I wasn't the subject of their revenge?"

"Who knows."

Kirigiri answered nonchalantly.

Tsutsumi glanced at the rearview mirror, which reflected her expressionless face staring out the window.

"How's the phone?"

"Still can't get through."

"That's why I hate the countryside..."

"By the way, I have a request."

"Request? Oh, what would a detective request of me?"

"Can you drop me off at a nearby station? If not, then just drop me off anywhere."

"Huh?" Tsutsumi couldn't help asking back. "Wait, what about the institute? Are you just going to go back as if nothing happened?"

"Yes."

"What do you mean 'yes'!"

"The outsider is leaving, isn't this just what you want?"

"Then what the hell were you there for!" Tsutsumi raised his voice out of anxiety. "You came to make a mess, and then run away when you're done? You are such a selfish brat..."

"I didn't plan on meeting anyone if I could, and leave immediately after seeing the crime scene. But when I saw you injured on the ground, I couldn't just ignore you. I couldn't just leave you to die. I don't need to be told that I stirred things up. The outcome would have been the same whether I was there or not, wouldn't it?"

"True... but the discovery of the situation may've been delayed by several hours..."

"My goal was to learn about the contents of the case in detail. Now that this goal has been achieved, I have to go back."

"How can I just let you go, how am I going to explain to Hoshī and the others and the police?"

"I'll explain that to the police, no problem."

"Ah, right."

Without realizing it, there is no longer a continuous downward curve in front, and sparse fields and homes could be seen everywhere.

"And then? Have you deduced who the real murderer is?"

"Hard to say."

Kirigiri replied briefly, and then fell silent.

On the left and right sides of the road are terraces covered in silver color, not to mention the convenience stores, and even the station is out of sight.

Is it really okay to let her off like this.

It's clear that she has nothing to do with this case, and there is no room for doubt about it. But it's not clear why she came to the institute to investigate.

That said, is she really a detective? No, if she is not a detective, then who is she? Such a child who claims to be a detective appearing alone at the scene of the crime is really puzzling.

Is it okay not to think about it?

Or should measures be taken?

"Hey, how did you know that something would happen to the institute?"

"I can't tell you this."

"Did you come alone?"

"I came here by myself in a taxi."

"Your companion didn't come with you? You should have a companion, right? You have to go back and report to them what happened in the institute, right?"

"They are waiting for me elsewhere."

"Is that so....."

Tsutsumi glanced at the fuel gauge, there isn't much gas left.
there is no way to drive continuously for a long time.

"How do you plan to report to your companion? You'll tell them that the murder is a locked room mystery created by using 'The Corsican Brothers' phenomenon?"

"No way." Kirigiri said with a sigh. "That kind of thing isn't possible."

"But... no matter how you think about it, there is no other way to kill Shikon-san in Room L? You must break through two-layer locks to go to Room L. The door locks are all fingerprint authentication type, and the two people who had the fingerprints that can unlock the doors were drinking together in the sub-building. As long as the two of them weren't lying— ah, yes! **They were actually accomplices, and they both lied, right?**"

"If it was a sudden crime, it's indeed necessary to consider this possibility, but this time it's a planned crime that had been fully prepared. If Hachisuka-san and Nagate-san are the murderers, then they would have each taken different methods to ensure that they had an alibi when they made their plans."

"That's just your impression, right? Do you have any evidence to prove that they are not the murderers?"

"Unfortunately, I have no evidence."

"Therefore, you see, they did—"

"The police may judge this way. The police cannot believe that an extraordinary phenomenon that only occurs between twins can create a locked room. They should first be inclined to the accomplices theory."

"Of course."

"But— as long as it can be proved that the locked room was made by one real murderer, then it will also be possible to deny that the two of them are accomplices."

"What do you mean?"

"Pointing out the real culprit, that's our task."

"You mean you have solved the mystery of that locked room?"

"Yes, there's no question that the cases I've encountered before were much more complicated than this."

Kirigiri said triumphantly.

At this time, Tsutsumi made up his mind.

If I don't kill her, things may turn to the worst later.

Tsutsumi increased the speed of the car.

Kareobana Academy – Salvador Yadorigi Fukurō

In the middle of the dark mountain road, Yadorigi slammed the car brakes to a stop.

In the light of the car's headlights, a huge black shape can be seen.

A giant that completely blocked the mountain road.

If the brakes were a bit late, the car probably would have crashed into it.

The giant is hunched over in the middle of the road with its dark arms spread wide. Is it trying to find an unfortunate person who has wandered into the forest? Or is it dozing off, tired from its duty in the forest.

Yadorigi reversed his car, stopped it on the side of the road, and got out of the car with his coat and bag. He took out the Maglite flashlight from his bag and directed it at the giant.

Probably a little trick by light and shadow, the thing that looked like a giant isn't a giant of course— In some way, it's more problematic— It's **a landslide.**

The ground along the left-hand slope collapsed like an avalanche, and the road got blocked by soil with rocks and trees. What looked like a giant's left arm is actually a fallen cedar tree, and what looked like a giant's body is a huge rock. Ghosts reveal their true form in Kareobana. Yadorigi chuckled to himself, remembering that saying.

Okay, what to do next?

To get to Kareobana Academy where the problem lies, one has to take this road, but there's no way for the car to go any further. And due to the steep slopes on both sides of the road, it's also difficult to detour on foot.

He checked the time. It's already the next day, 2 AM on January 12th. He got here as fast as he could, but it still took him quite a while. 38 hours had passed since the 'Black Challenge' started, and there are still 130 hours left.

It should be safe to assume that all the people involved in Kareobana Academy case have gathered in the school building ahead, and the landslide may be a means to trap them in Kareobana Academy. After the only way to the outside world got blocked, a closed environment has been formed, and the stage for the 'Black Challenge' is impeccable.

Having said that, is it possible to artificially cause a landslide of this scale? It may be possible to do it with explosives, but the scale is too big for it to be a personal crime.

Of course, if there is an organization scale of assistance, it would be another story.

Is it really a 'Black Challenge'?

A murder case is being carried out ahead, and this assumption is getting closer and closer to the truth.

Kirigiri Kyōko said before that 'excessive intervention is strictly prohibited'. because by the nature of the game, interferers are

dangerous and will probably be ruthlessly eliminated, but Yadorigi doesn't intend to listen to her. The case may happen right under his nose, how could he just sit back and watch, let alone a case related to the Crime Victims' Relief Committee.

For Yadorigi, it's no longer a matter of no concern to him.

Because that organization took the life of his partner.

His partner's name was Uozumi Taehime.

She had been tracking down a scammer since last year and suddenly lost contact at the end of the year. She was a person who was keen on solving crimes. Once she goes out, she wouldn't return for a long time. This was a common occurrence. However, something wasn't right that time. Not only was there no news from her, but was completely missing.

He had tried to follow her footsteps, but found no clues, as if someone had carefully erased all the traces she had left.

Yadorigi intuited that scammers wouldn't adopt such tactics, and smelled the scent of a syndicate crime. Maybe a certain organization felt that Uozumi was an eyesore and resorted to coercive measures. Yadorigi investigated several organizations with this in mind. In the process, he heard rumors of a mysterious criminal organization that specializes in targeting detectives, but due to too little intelligence, he wasn't able to catch any clues.

However, some time ago, Yadorigi himself was involved in a 'Black Challenge', which led him to learn about the existence of the Crime Victims' Relief Committee.

If Uozumi was involved in a 'Black Challenge' and lost contact, then she may not be alive anymore...

After the Takeda Haunted Mansion case, he specially went to visit the murderer because he thought he might be able to find out about the Crime Victims' Relief Committee from the murderer. At the same time, it was also out of hope that he might be able to learn about Uozumi's whereabouts. As a result, he couldn't find out about Uozumi from the murderer, but he got to know Kirigiri Kyōko and Samidare Yui through that case, and learned the whole story from them.

This must be fate's doing.

Even if Kirigiri Kyōko didn't entrust him, he would've gone to the battlefield by himself.

A tribute to his partner—

Uozumi didn't like sentimental terms like 'tribute'. She was always so calm and composed when facing cases. That was her style. However, as a detective, she was always passionate about her work, and Yadorigi knew this better than anyone else.

He has every reason to put his own life on the line in this battle.

So he can't stop here.

Yadorigi looked at his phone, and there was no signal. If he moves further, he would lose all means of contact with the outside world. Normally, he would drive back to the city to inform the relevant authorities about the landslide, but he then would have

to stay there until the landslide is cleared, which is unavoidable, at least until dawn.

By then it would be too late.

No time to hesitate.

Since walking over won't do, then a jump will.

Yadorigi jumped on a collapsed rock.

Another rock became his next foothold.

Just like that, he jumped on the rocks and fallen trees one after another, his long, thin, strong legs dancing lightly amidst the dangerous landslide.

He passed the obstacle in a blink of an eye.

He was like a ballet dancer on the stage. In fact, his amazing physical fitness was from the ballet he practiced since childhood. If any other person besides him came here, they probably wouldn't be able to enter this closed environment.

Yadorigi didn't look back, and moved forward with his back to the landslide, walking up the mountain path by the light reflected on the snow from his flashlight.

The concrete road came to an end and turned into a gravel road that wasn't paved. Chains are held between the trees on the left and right to block the road ahead. A sign is hanging on the chains that read 'Private roads, no entry'.

Yadorigi shone the Maglite flashlight at his feet, and there were many footprints on the snow.

No doubt, something must be happening in the darkness ahead.

Yadorigi crossed the chains and walked forward.

The road was getting darker and darker. Trees looming from the left and right, the road gradually became narrower, and finally even the sky was covered by branches, it felt like walking in a creepy tunnel.

A lone light appeared in the darkness.

Yadorigi knew that it's undoubtedly the entrance to hell— yet he still ran towards it, as if he is chasing the warmth of that light.

The view opened up, and a rusty iron grille door appeared in front of him, with a faint white light from an outdoor lamp on the door post, the light of which had just been seen from afar. There is an outdoor lamp on each of the left and right doorposts, the one on the left is broken and no longer lit.

The back of the door was dyed pure white with snow, it should be the courtyard. In the darkness opposite the courtyard, he can barely see the old wooden school building.

Is that 'Kareobana Academy' —

The building doesn't give the impression of a school, but more like a cursed Western-style mansion, with an ominous aura. The impression may be completely different on a clear day, but at least now it's a stage that fits well with the 'Black Challenge'.

Several lines of footprints stretched from the front gate to the school building. On closer inspection, there are also footprints coming back from the opposite side.

What were they doing in this scary place? Maybe they were forced to play a gamble involving their lives, just like Kirigiri Kyōko and the others had experienced.

Yadorigi turned off the flashlight and blended into the darkness, as he approached the school building. He wanted to avoid being discovered by others as much as possible. He knew very well that in this closed environment, he is an uninvited guest. For the murderer, they would not hesitate to kill him in order to get rid of their opponent.

He walked to the entrance of the school building.

The building is no different from ruins. A musty smell can be felt as soon as he got close. The door glass at the entrance is broken, and the peculiar smell comes out of it. The footprints lead all the way inside.

He held his breath and walked through the entrance.

It's completely dark.

The clattering sound as he stepped on the glass shards rang out beneath his feet. He passed through the shoe cabinets placed at equal intervals and came to the creaking hallway.

It was then that Yadorigi removed his sunglasses.

His blue eyes adapted to the darkness.

His eyeballs has been allergic to light from birth, and the sun's rays during the day are like a poison to him, so his sunglasses never left him. And this gave him an outstanding ability to distinguish light– that is, the sense of color, which is a powerful weapon for a detective who mainly deals with paintings. At the same time, due to his strong night vision ability, he is also very good at night activities.

Darkness is his only partner.

Yadorigi slowly walked forward down the corridor, trying not to make too much noise from the floor. There is a classroom on the left side, but there are only a few desks and chairs in it, it's basically empty. It doesn't look like anyone was here.

What on earth is going on here...

He came to another hallway, where the air turned sharply cold, an outer corridor. The door in front should be the gym, the aluminum sliding door is half open.

Thick darkness accompanied air-conditioning flowed from the gap in the door.

Yadorigi looked in through the gap, holding his breath.

Inside, he can see a basketball hoop and a stage where its curtain was lifted. It really is a gym.

Colorful lines were drawn on the floor. In addition, there are countless white objects standing.

Candles.

The candles are standing on the floor of the gym.

And these candles weren't haphazardly placed on the ground, they seem to be arranged in a geometric figure.

Yadorigi turned on his flashlight and looked at it. The white light made the geometric figure on the floor emerge in the darkness.

—A circle.

The candles formed two circles, next to each other. However, one of the circles is incomplete, only half of it. The shape is exactly like the number '8', with half of a circle missing.

The candles are varied in length and thickness, and many of them feel like they are worn out. They have already melted and are short. The melting and dripping wax left white spots on the blackened floor.

And in the center of the circle—

A human figure.

Someone laying there on their back.

A female from the looks of it, slender and petite, wearing a black dress, or a black robe to be precise.

In the center of her body— just near the belly button, a thick white stake is inserted vertically. The area around the stake looks wet, probably the black robe soaked with blood.

She is obviously dead.

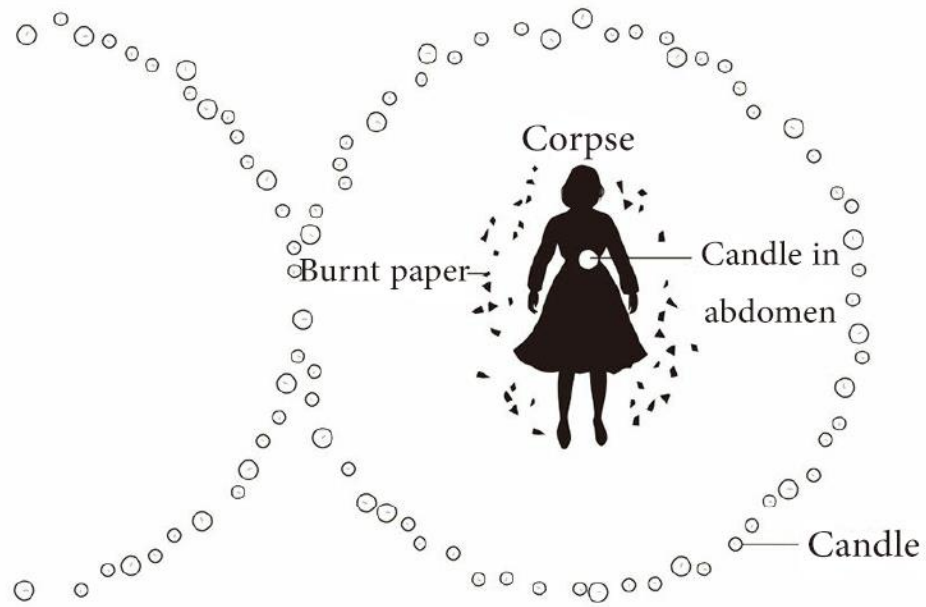
Yadorigi took a step into the gym and approached the girl.

She looks young, her expression is serene as if she is asleep, and there are spots of white wax all over her black clothes.

From a closer look, **the stake sticking straight into her abdomen seems to be a candle.**

In other words, she is in the middle of the circle formed by candles, and was pierced by one of them and died.

The challenge letter did say that the murder weapon would be a candle, but he had no idea that it was going to be used this way.



Kareobana Academy crime scene

Yadorigi entered the candle circle. Although this magic circle's effect isn't yet known, no matter what kind of magic it is, the detective is the one who is going to break it.

He checked the girl's breathing and pulse, and sure enough, she is dead, her body temperature could barely be felt.

This girl should also have a family and loved ones...

Yadorigi let out the grief in his heart with a sigh, and observed the murder weapon.

The candle that pierced into the abdomen had melted quite a lot. It was most likely lit before. Maybe there is a ritual meaning in it.

Something like burnt paper is scattered around the body. It's mostly ashes. When he picked up the burnt paper, he found it to be a scrap of a book written in an unfamiliar language. Yadorigi had learned some of the major languages in the course of his work, yet this is the first time he had seen this one.

Yadorigi walked away from the body and looked around the gym again. The building itself is nothing special. There is a stage on the inner side, and dark green curtain is hanging next to it. There are two entrances and exits, the first is the aluminum sliding door where Yadorigi came in from, and the other is a small door on the inner wall. The door has a large panel with 'Emergency Exit' written on it.

Yadorigi approached the 'Emergency Exit' door to check. There is a knob in the center of the door handle. It seems that one can unlock and lock the door by turning this knob. The door is locked.

He opened the door and looked out. There is a large dark forest in front of him, and no footprints can be found on the snow.

According to the challenge letter, this murder case uses a locked room technique.

However, the sliding door at the entrance wasn't locked.

Can this be called a locked room, or is the whole place, including the school building, a locked room in the snow?

Yadorigi put on his sunglasses, fell into deep thought, and stood there for a while.

He wanted to investigate again, but it would be troublesome if he is found out, so he decided to go out and observe the situation.

Yadorigi turned to the door.

At this moment, four guys and a girl have been standing side by side at the entrance at some point in time, and they are looking at Yadorigi with an awestruck expression.

"Uncle... who are you?"

One of them pointed a flashlight at Yadorigi and said.

—He has been discovered.

"Excuse me." Yadorigi said in a calm voice, trying not to spoil the atmosphere here. "I will leave right away, so please do not mind."

"No no no, how can I not mind, we can't let you go so easily."

The punk-style youth with a skull-patterned headscarf stopped Yadorigi. There are chains hanging on his clothes everywhere, and it isn't known where it's connected.

"Are you maybe... the murderer?"

"How come." Yadorigi raised his hands and replied. "I just got here. you all may not believe me, but I am really a completely unrelated outsider. Please pretend you have not seen me, let me go back, and you all have a nice day."

Yadorigi planned to leave again.

However, the punk youth grabbed Yadorigi's arm.

"What's this 'you all have a nice day', are you fucking with me, explain yourself truthfully first."

For a full three minutes, Yadorigi kept acting like he was struggling, but the people in front of him obviously did not allow him to exercise his right to remain silent.

He had no choice but to take the Detective Library card out of his pocket and give it to the punk youth. The punk youth showed a surprised expression and showed the card to his companions.

"Woaaah, awesome, is this real?"

"Whoa, a detective! Everyone, look. A real detective has appeared! Hey, it's okay to look, but don't touch, it's forbidden to touch. Although I want to touch him too, but I'm holding it back! I still want to touch him! Ah, no, my hands aren't complying..."

"Manager wait, are you over-excited?"

Only two of the four people reacted to the Detective Library card. One of them is a boy who looks like an ordinary student with a sweater over a plaid shirt.

The other is a thin young boy, wearing a saggy, out-of-size trench coat and a cheap-looking suit. He fluttered the sleeves of his overly long trench coat as he got too excited all by himself. The person called the manager is also him. He is the shortest among these people, and he looks like a middle school-age kid trying to dress like an adult as much as possible.

The last one is the only girl among them, but she is hiding behind the others, a little far away. And even though she is indoors, she has a black umbrella, holding it in front of her like a shield, and looking at Yadorigi with alert eyes from the side of the umbrella, as if she is cautious all over. Although her face and body are almost completely covered by her umbrella, the reason why she can be considered a female is that she is wearing a white dress and her attractive thighs are exposed from the large splits on it. This should be a so-called Chinese dress.

At the same time, the punk youth tilted his head looking at Yadorigi's card.

"What's this stuff, is it awesome?"

"Don't you know? This is the certification card of an agency. It's said that this agency has several tens of thousands of detectives registered in it."

The boy in the plaid shirt said with glowing eyes. All in all, judging from his appearance and behavior, he should be the most normal among these four.

"So what?"

"He is a detective, and his rank is '2', so he is quite an expert."

"No way... you don't even know this. Okay, it doesn't matter if you don't know! Just don't touch him!"

The manager in the trench coat quarreled.

"Why would I want to touch. And why are you so excited and want to touch him anyways? So creepy."

"There's a real detective standing in front of me, anyone would feel the same way as me."

"Only faggots like you." the punk youth said unimpressed. "I don't believe this little card. Whether he's a detective or the prime minister, the fact is that a suspicious person has sneaked in here. Where did you come from? What are you doing here?"

"I cannot tell you exactly where I came from, but my office is in Paris. You can search it on the Internet. Also, I was tipped off that an incident would happen here so I came to investigate. The source cannot be disclosed."

"What're you talking about? Someone expected something to happen here?"

The punk youth raised his voice in a panic.

"Paris?" The Manager also shouted at the same time. "A-an office in Paris? Hey, did you all hear that? Detective-san, could you please repeat that part again?"

"About the Paris office?"

"Eeeee—"

The manager leaned back excitedly.

"Was there like a crime warning or something?"

The young boy in the plaid shirt pushed the manager aside and asked.

"Sort of."

"Damn, *those guys* really planned to frame us from the beginning..." the punk youth said to himself, and then went on to say: "You came alone? Where're the police? The road was blocked because of a landslide, yeah? Is it clear now?"

"That is too many questions. Alright, I will answer in order: I came alone, the police have not yet grasped the situation here, the landslide is still the same, and the road is not clear."

"Then how did you get here."

"By walking normally."

"Huh? How did you do that..."

"I had good footholds, so it was rather easy to get over. But it might be difficult to get back to the other side."

"'Might'?? You're such a weird uncle! Why didn't you call the police!"

"Because I was not sure if an incident really happened here."
Yadorigi said while looking back at the murder scene. "Originally, I was going to leave here quietly so as not to interfere with the investigation, but since I have been discovered by you guys, there is nothing I can do about it. Although murder cases are not my specialty, please leave it to me. **I will solve it as soon as possible.**"

Yadorigi didn't say it particularly sonorously, as if he was talking about the weather, he declared plainly that he would solve the case. It was too abrupt of a statement that it got almost ignored by everyone present.

"Amazing... amazing, Detective-san..."

The manager finally plopped and landed on his knees, and his legs began to tremble.

"Can you really solve it?"

The punk youth asked suspiciously.

"It has to be solved because my situation is rather complicated."
Yadorigi shrugged. "If you want the case to be solved, your cooperation is very important. So please explain to me what happened here."

"No problem... but it's cold here, let's talk about it somewhere else." said the boy in the plaid shirt. "There's a room with a stove, let's go there and talk."

A classroom on the inner side of the corridor became their residence. A kerosene stove is placed in the center of the classroom where the desks and chairs have been removed, warming the room.

The four people involved in the case, plus Yadorigi, formed a circle around the stove.

"Oh no, I made a fool of myself earlier." the manager said. "I've taken three or four pills of a certain kind of medicine that I usually take, and now I've finally calmed down. Siiigh... Um... Oh right, we are members of the Mystery Study Group of Ōudaitōitsu University."

"Mystery Study Group means paranormal related?"

"It's about detective stories."

"Oh, I see."

"I'm Manager Anbo Gorō, third year. I'm the Manager of the Mystery Study Group. Everyone calls me **Columbo**. Wanna know why I'm called Columbo? It's not because I'm obsessed with my wife, but because when you say my name in English, it kinda sounds like that. Repeat it about ten times and you'll understand. Oh and, even though it's a 'Study Group', I'm the 'Manager'. Don't mind it much, it's just a figure of speech."

He said with a smile.

"Columbo-san, huh."

His hair, which is messy and sticking out everywhere, and the trench coat he is wearing, should have been purposely dressed according to Columbo. Columbo himself was a middle-aged man who was neither tall nor short, not fat nor thin, but this guy's body shape is like a short child, as if he had picked up old clothes that were too big to wear, looking pathetic.

Then the members of the Study Group started to introduce themselves naturally, and everyone spoke in order.

"Um... I'm Uchida Tōru, second year, everyone calls me Tōru."

Said the young man in the plaid shirt. He looks like an ordinary college student. You can probably see two or three people dressed exactly like him immediately after entering any university campus. The lack of characteristics is his characteristic among these people.

"My name... is Wan Erī ."

The woman in the Chinese dress gave her name. She had previously covered herself with her umbrella, and stood silently at the back, she finally put the umbrella away and sat down when she came to the front of the stove. She has waist-long black hair, very silky and beautiful, with her thighs exposed unguardedly.

"D-don't stare please..."

She hurriedly propped up the umbrella to cover her face, but didn't cover what should be. She peeked out a small part of her face from beside the umbrella and continued:

"I am... I'm in second year... everyone calls me Ellery... but I'm a girl, the name Ellery is weird... and embarrassing... I don't like male names... can't I change my name to Alice?"

Some of her words can be heard with a foreign accent.

"She is a Chinese-American student." Columbo added. "She is a fan of Alice Arisugawa, but because her name sounds similar to Ellery, we gave her that name. The name Ellery is very cool; you don't have to be embarrassed about it, Ellery. And for the record, Alice is a man.

"...Ehhh!"

Ellery's eyes rounded.

Only the punk youth is left. However, he turned his face to the other side, looking like he is not interested in the conversation.

"What is your name if you do not mind?"

Yadorigi pressed.

"Doesn't matter if I say it."

"It may not matter, but it may cause you unnecessary suspicion. I will report the information obtained here to my companions as it is."

"I'm not the murderer."

"Why are you refusing to introduce yourself?"

"Shuddup, it doesn't matter!"

"Kōsuke, you will only leave a bad impression in Detective-san's mind like this."

Tōru whispered beside him.

"Kōsuke?"

Yadorigi asked in return.

"What the, why did you say it, Tōru." the punk youth clicked his tongue. "...Yeah, I'm Kōsuke."

"This is the nickname, right?"

"That's enough information!"

"Just to be safe, please also tell me your real name."

"I advise you not to continue invading other people's privacy."

"His name is Kanzashīchi Kōsuke. His parents have a really good taste. The name immediately struck my heart! I once saw on the university bulletin board that the student office sent out a notice calling him there, and the shock I received felt greater than being abducted by aliens, so I rushed ahead and waited outside the student office, and when he came, I caught him and made him join the Mystery Study. Isn't that right, Kōsuke?"

"Don't touch me, you creep! Don't expose someone else's real name all of a sudden." Kōsuke scolded Columbo. "I hate my name, so I don't wanna say it, that's all."

"It is a good name." Yadorigi replied with a smile. "Thank you, now I know everyone's names. Then let us move on."

"Just say what you have to say."

Kōsuke said with little interest.

"First of all, I would like to ask, why did all the members of the Mystery Study Group come to this ruin?"

The four people looked at each other.

As the representative, Columbo said:

"The day before yesterday— at around 9 PM on January 10th— we received a letter."

He took a black envelope out of his pocket.

The envelope felt familiar.

"This is a letter from the Black Magic Study Group, and the envelope contained a black letterhead with a declaration of war against our Mystery Study Group."

"Black Magic Study Group?"

"Yes. They were antagonistic towards us when we started our study group. They are old acquaintances. You can say that our history is also a history of fighting the Black Magic Study Group."

Although it felt like a joke, his eyes were serious, and the others nodded in agreement with serious expressions.

"Why the adversarial relationship?"

"The study group activity room we are using was originally the activity room of the Black Magic Study Group. That was the beginning of the opposition. Whether or not a club is qualified to

rent an activity room in the university is determined by the number of members and the quality of the activities. Black Magic Study Group failed to pass the qualification for one year. It just so happened that at that time the Mystery Study Group got the activity room previously used by Black Magic Study Group. Since then, they felt that it was the Mystery Study Group that stole their activity space and started to become hostile towards us."

Columbo explained in a pompous tone.

"It's simply that they've got the wrong people to hate." Tōru sighed heavily, and continued. "Black Magic Study Group has been holding black magic rituals in the name of experiments to target the ones in the Mystery Group, like putting curses on us to make us have accidents or fail exams or something..."

"It is almost like children's pranks."

"Well, in the end, that's what student groups are like. Just like us who call each other nicknames from detective novels and go camping in isolated islands or snowy mountains. They also enjoy the atmosphere of holding black magic ceremonies."

"It's just that the nature of the Black Magic Study Group has changed in recent years." Columbo said. "Specifically, it was after a girl named Saki Fushie became the president. She only allowed girls to join. After that, the contents of the activities gradually became cult-like. Now everyone knows that they are a group of witches. The things they do on Saturday nights are unimaginable. I heard that they would sing karaoke until dawn and they call it

Witches' Sabbath. I've been worried about when they would cross the line. It seems that they've finally done it. hooo— hooo—"

"Because they're very pretty, they are still secretly very popular among some students."

Tōru said with a bitter smile.

"This is the declaration of war letter."

Columbo handed the black letterhead to Yadorigi.

Yadorigi read the seemingly hard-to-read text silently, struggling to understand the meaning.

"To all of you in the Mystery Study Group, the activity room you are now using was originally owned by the Black Magic Study Group and should be returned. The Black Magic Study Group hereby announces that it will try to retake the activity room. We are ready to take action at any time, but we will still strive for a peaceful solution to the issue first. With the utmost compassion, we will give you some time to consider. Please assemble at the following location within 6 hours, 6 minutes and 6 seconds from the receipt of this document, where we wish to have a final meeting with you."

"Who was the first to find the letter?"

"It was me." Tōru raised his hand. "I saw this letter on the table when I went to the study group's activity room to get a book."

Because the letter asked us to gather, I contacted the manager first."

"That was around 9 PM." Columbo continued. "After that, I tried every means possible, gathered all my wisdom, and got in touch with the members of the Black Magic Study Group, but only four people came. Although there were only five members of the Black Magic Study Group."

"I... live in the university dorms... as soon as the manager called, I rushed over."

Ellery said, hiding behind the umbrella.

"The student dormitory is right next to the university." Tōru explained. "It's divided into a girls' dormitory and a boys' dormitory. Ellery lives in the girls' dormitory and I live in the boys'. I ran out of books to read, so I went to the activity room in the university to check out books that others had put there. and that's when I found this letter."

"Was the university still open at 9 PM?"

"Everyone can come and go as they please from 6 AM to around 11 PM. Other than that, you have to show your student ID to the guard to go in."

"Other than students, can other people come and go as well?"

"Yeah, as long as you don't dress up in a particularly strange way, you won't be stopped."

It's also possible that someone from outside put the letter there. But that person needed to know where the activity room of the Mystery Study Group is.

"When Tōru contacted me, Columbo and I were playing **Mājan** at a Mājan parlor near the university." said Kōsuke. "I was having perfect luck at that time, but I had no choice but to put down my tiles and gather in the activity room."

"And after that?"

"The four of us got in a taxi together. The fare was quite expensive, but fortunately Ellery paid for it."

"I have plenty of pocket money... but I can only go to the beauty salon three times a week with it..."

Ellery said downcastly.

"I think we arrived around 1 AM?"

Kōsuke said.

"Yes, that's right." Tōru replied. "It took about 4 hours from the time the letter was found until everyone gathered here, so it shouldn't have taken longer than the prescribed time. I didn't expect this to happen..."

"How did you find the body?"

"When we got here, the gym was already like that. She was dead, and looked like she had just been killed."

"It was already like that when you arrived?"

"Yeah, that's correct." Columbo said. "After we arrived at this abandoned academy, we first stayed in the yard for a while waiting for the girls from the Black Magic Group, but there was no sign of them at all. So, we wondered if they had already arrived and started to look around in the academy. In the process, we quickly found the gym, but couldn't open the door at first, so we gave up. We looked around more but had little success... Only the gym door was locked and couldn't be opened. So we turned back and forced the door open, then saw it."

"The gym was locked before?"

"Yes! It's a locked room mystery." Columbo suddenly raised his voice. "We checked the doors and windows immediately after entering the scene. All doors and windows were locked from the inside."

"I mean... is it really a locked room?" Kōsuke interrupted. "Maybe the murderer had the key to the gym on them, they just locked the door and walked away normally. We didn't find the key anyway."

"Oh, right. Just because the gym of an abandoned academy like this is locked doesn't mean it should be called a locked room, because the existence of the key is vague in the first place. Who has it, where is it usually placed, and how many spares are there?... Since there's no way to determine these conditions, it's not strange that the entrance door was locked."

Columbo said with exaggerated hand movements.

"The problem is not that the doors of the gym were locked, but that there were **no footprints around the academy.**" Tōru said. "If we check when the snow started and stopped falling around here, we might be able to determine more accurately whether this was a locked room murder or not."

They discussed the tightness of the locked room, but it should be assumed that the 'Black Challenge' had been carried out as foreshadowed.

"When you found the body, what were the candles like, were they lit?"

"Yeah, some were lit and some were out." Tōru replied. "We probably should've left the crime scene as it is to preserve it, but we thought that leaving it may cause a fire hazard, so we blew out all the candles before we left."

"And after that?"

"We wanted to get back to town as soon as possible, but the landslide made us unable to go back, and our phones couldn't get through... We ended up stuck here all day as a result." Tōru said in frustration. "Then again, it's a good thing there's a working stove, if we don't have one we'd probably all be freezing to death by now..."

"Hahaha, Tōru, you're exaggerating."

"That's not an exaggeration, Manager. There is an old thermometer hanging in another classroom. It was already a

degree Celsius below zero during the day, probably because the terrain is relatively high in this area."

"Haha... no wonder it's so cold..."

Columbo's smile seemed to freeze.

"We couldn't just sit still here, so we went to the gym to check the scene of the crime again. At that moment, we met you, Detective-san."

"I got a rough idea of what happened." Yadorigi said. "Next I want to ask about the victim. Do you have any clues about the identity of the murdered woman?"

"I dunno anything about that."

Kōsuke said stiffly.

"She is the fifth member of our study group." Columbo said with a haggard look. "Her name was Naruko Rei, and she was in second year like Tōru and Ellery. We used to call her **Lady Grey**. She's a bit of a mischievous girl. When I feed the pigeons in the park, she would often run over, and drive away all them at once."

"It must be the work of the Black Magic Group! You saw the weird scene, who else could have done that besides the Black Magic Group!"

"Kōsuke! Don't draw conclusions based on impressions alone. Since we are the Mystery Study Group, we must logically deduce the murderer. This is also a tribute to the dead Lady Grey! Isn't that right, Detective-san?"

A tribute—

The word instantly reminded Yadorigi of his dead partner.

"Yes." Yadorigi replied calmly, without showing any mood shifts.

"Of course, even if it is not someone from the Black Magic Group, the murderer must be logically deduced."

"Screw logic. They called us here, right? It's clearly written on the letter. Whether it's a curse or black magic, they must be the ones who used Grey as a live sacrifice for some stupid ritual! The main culprit is Saki Fushie!"

"We... were on time... Black Magic Group were not... They are liars..." Ellery closed the umbrella and started wiping tears. "They planned to kill Grey-chan from the beginning..."

"But their letter clearly stated that they would give us time to consider, why would they go to the trouble of writing something that gives us time and then immediately renege on it" Columbo said with his arms folded. "Did something happen inside the witch group? Like a split within them, a coup by the hawks among the witches... or their threat to us wasn't originally motivated by a unified will..."

"You always talk about hawks and pigeons, but for what purpose would the Black Magic Group members do this."

"Isn't it written in the letter, taking back the activity room."

"Why kill Grey to take back the activity room?"

"As long as we of the Mystery Group all die, the activity room will become theirs."

"Whaa? What do you mean? They aren't satisfied with killing Grey alone, and they plan to use a landslide to trap us here and make us weak and die, right? Stop joking around."

"But we haven't eaten anything for over 24 hours in this severe cold... It's exactly what they want." Tōru groaned. "I'm so hungry... Detective-san, did you bring anything to eat?"

"Sadly, no." Yadorigi opened his hands. "But everyone looks healthy. Even if you do not eat anything, you can live for a week. For water, there is plenty of snow outside, so you can drink it after heating."

Yadorigi said with a relaxed smile.

However, his words didn't provide any comfort, and the members of the Mystery Group dropped their shoulders with tired faces.

"Until then, the stove will be the problem." Yadorigi said. "The fuel gauge shows that the kerosene tank is almost empty. It should be completely empty by dawn. After which we will have to wait for help in below-freezing temperatures."

"H-hey, we'll really be annihilated if this goes on! Detective, you have to think of a way!"

"Fufu, it is a big mistake to think that a detective can do anything."

"What's so funny, damnit! If you had called the police, they would've started to clean up the landslide, at least we would've gone back by tomorrow!"

"No, I am sorry, but it is okay, I will solve it before everyone freezes to death."

Yadorigi answered with a smile on his face.

"What the fuck is with this guy... I don't know if he's a reliable or an idiot detective..."

Kōsuke shook his head helplessly.

"There is not much time left. Let us continue. It seems that you all have made a thorough investigation of the academy. Have you seen any members of the Black Magic Study Group or found evidence to prove that they were here?"

"No, we didn't find anything like that."

"Uh-huh, I thought so."

"What do you wanna say?"

Kōsuke topped back and said.

"This case has nothing to do with the Black Magic Study Group. It just borrowed the name of the Black Magic Study Group to draw everyone out. It seems that the murderer had done their research, and they knew what kind of letter they needed to write to call you out."

"Huh? So do you mean that the contents of the letter are bullshit."

"Yes. In fact, the murder took place despite your compliance with the time limit, and it is clear from this that the murderer's actions were inconsistent. For the murderer, the retaking of the activity room and the relationship with the Mystery Study Group are not important. The murderer only had one purpose, and that is to kill Naruko Rei."

"P-please wait a minute." Tōru said with a flustered face. "Since this matter has nothing to do with the Black Magic Group, what's with the traces of that ritual left in the gym? No matter how you look at it, it's a trace left by black magic, right?"

"It just looks like that. In the story made up by the murderer, the murderer must be someone from the Black Magic Study Group. And perhaps the scapegoat is the leader Saki Fushie."

"Is that so... It's true that there's something wrong with the Black Magic Group recently, but I don't think their group would kill anyone no matter what." said Columbo, scratching his messy hair. "It's just that, in that case, who is the murderer... they have to be at least familiar with our situation."

"Familiar with our situation..."

Suddenly they all showed suspicion and began to observe each other's faces.

"D-don't tell me you suspect the murderer is among us."

Tōru said as he barely pulled out half a smile.

"How is this possible... we are good partners!"

Ellery said aloud in a rare moment.

However, no one responded to her words.

"Ah, right..." Kōsuke seemed to have thought of something and called out. "As long as this fact exists, there is no criminal in us. Hey, Ellery. Did you want to say that?"

"Kōsuke-senpai, you're slow to notice..."

"Fact?"

Yadorigi asked.

"The presumed time of death. As far as we can tell, when Grey's body was found, it was almost 4 to 5 hours after her death. Columbo, you understand how this stuff works, yeah? Explain it to him."

"I actually don't."

"Hey... come on, Tōru!"

"Okay. It took 4 hours to drive from our university to this Kareobana academy. 4 hours had passed since Grey died when we found the body... **and 4 hours before that, we were stopping a cab near the university with the intention of leaving.** In other words, it was impossible for the four of us to have killed her!"

"That's it. How about that, detective, this proves that the murderer is not among us."

"Is the estimated time of death accurate?"

"Kōsuke and Ellery are medical students." Columbo said. "That means they both know forensics."

"Yeah, but that's still not much knowledge compared to mystery nuts like Columbo and Tōru."

"Kōsuke-senpai's diagnosis is not wrong... Considering the low temperature... and based on the postmortem spots and rigor mortis... I think the time of death is correct..."

Ellery said.

"No matter what Kōsuke's opinion is, since Ellery said so, it should be correct."

"Hey Tōru, you bastard..."

"Alright, alright." Columbo rounded off. "All in all, this gives us a solid alibi. How about it, Detective-san? We have always thought that Black Magic Study Group are the murderers, and hadn't considered at all whether we have an alibi, but now, after examination, all of us have a definite alibi."

"It seems so."

Yadorigi nodded and said.

Regarding the estimated time of death of the victim, at least two people who know forensics vouched together, so they should be trustworthy. In addition to the two medical students, others are also mystery nuts, and if their claim of the presumed time of death is false, it would most likely be debunked. The diagnosis should be correct.

In this case, the murderer is not be among them.

Killing Naruko Rei near the university, loading the body into the trunk, and then all four coming together in a taxi— this technique should be difficult to achieve. It seems that they came empty-handed. If the murderer is among them, then one person would have to move with a large piece of luggage, and their crime would be exposed immediately. If all four of them were accomplices, then this kind of technique is possible, and it won't work if they committed the crime alone.

It's not known whether all the perpetrators of the 'Black Challenge' were alone, but considering that this game was organized by Ryūzōji Gekka, one shouldn't think in the direction of a simple multi-person crime theory.

So apart from the four people here, the murderer is someone else.

Of course, this is also entirely possible.

The murderer may have already escaped from Kareobana Academy. The landslide wasn't to trap the suspect, but to prevent the detective from stepping into the scene, so this makes sense.

It's also possible that the murderer is still here, hiding somewhere, waiting for the opportunity to kill the next target.

—This should've been left to a number '9' Detective who specializes in murder cases.

It's almost 4 AM.

Yadorigi suddenly thought of Uozumi.

If this is the time to back out, then what's the point of coming here?

For Yadorigi, facing this incident bravely is not only a tribute to Uozumi, but also revenge against the criminal organization.

However, it's also clear that the motivation of the adversary Yadorigi is facing is also rooted in revenge.

The sense of fear that Yadorigi evoked during this case wasn't directed at the murderer and the organization, but at the 'same as them' deep in his heart.

Certainly everyone has such a place in their hearts.

Even if one step is wrong, he may become on their side.

Because of this, he has to stand up and fight.

Now it's better to concentrate on how to solve the case at hand.

If Uozumi was here, she would've definitely done so.

Yadorigi stood up.

He intended to leave the classroom alone.

"Hey, wait." Kōsuke stopped him. "Why're you standing up suddenly, where're you going alone?"

"I want to go back to the crime scene to investigate, maybe there is something to discover."

"You really have your own way..."

"Then let's go together." Columbo said, jumping up. "We were going to investigate again too! Well, fellas, we're going to gather the power of the Mystery Study Group to help Detective-san!"

"I hate how hyped he is all the time..."

Kōsuke murmured a little. In the end, all the members of the Mystery Group went with Yadorigi.

10 minutes passed after the investigation in the gym began.

No one discovered anything new, but Columbo has just found something concerning.

"Detective-san, Detective-san! Look at this! Something that looks like a thread fell on the ground here, but it's burnt to a crisp and falls apart when you touch it! Here, look, it's so small! Is this important evidence? It should be, right?"

While dealing with Columbo, who was pestering him like a puppy, Yadorigi observed the thread he mentioned. As he said, it looks like a thin line of ashes of something that burned out, and fell some distance away from the corpse.

There are some other burned pieces of shredded paper scattered around the body with strange writings on them. Although at first glance it feels like it was burned for some kind of ritual, there may be other reasons.

Burnt paper and thread.

What does this mean?

Yadorigi walked around in the gym while thinking.

His exhaled breath is turning into clouds of white mist. The air here is almost as cold as outside, probably because the area is very open, it's about the size of two basketball courts. There's also a stage on the inner side, and the height of the ceiling is almost more than 10 meters.

When the body was found, the gym was a locked room, and the only access points are the front entrance and the back door leading to the outer corridors. But, the back door was of course locked, and there was no sign of anyone coming or going on the snow outside.

It should be considered that the murderer entered and exited through the front entrance.

Since the door key hasn't been found, there should be no need to treat this as an important issue. The problem lies in the snow. The time when the snow stopped was before the presumed time of death, which should later be checked by asking the weather station. The idea is that the whole school is a locked room in the snow. However, this can't be confirmed because of the lack of cell phone service here.

Putting aside the tightness of the locked room for the time being, the question that should be investigated now is whether **the murderer is among the members of the Mystery Study Group.**

All of them have alibis, but even so, it's impossible to conclude that they are 'not the murderer'. If the locked room murder technique is exposed, their alibis might crack.

"Except for the wound in the abdomen, there are no other external injuries."

Ellery leaned close to the body to examine it carefully. she is quite proactive about the body, unlike how she normally speaks with people. Even her tone of voice, which was lispy before, has improved.

"I think the tip of the candle in the abdomen was sharpened and nailed into Grey-chan's body like a stake, or maybe there is a sharp object embedded in the tip part, making it easier to pierce the body."

"There are traces of fire on the candle."

Yadorigi observed the murder weapon and said.

"Yes, the wax melted. It was lit, but I don't know if it was before or after stabbing Grey-chan."

"In that case, I think it was lit after she was stabbed to death."

Tōru stood far away and said.

"Hey, how do you know?"

Kōsuke asked him.

"If the candle was nailed into Grey's body like a stake, then you would need to hit the head of the candle with a hammer or something. In this case, the head of the candle must be horizontal, otherwise It wouldn't be easy to strike. But as you can see, the top part had melted. If you strike with a hammer in this case, the edge of the molten part would be damaged, or the

whole candle would be cracked open. However, there doesn't seem to be such a trace. In other words, the head of the candle was struck in a horizontal state and then lit afterwards. I think this should be the correct order."

"Ohhh— I see, you're a smart guy."

The top part of the candle where the problem lies is about 7 or 8 centimeters in diameter, and melted in the middle, forming a substantial concave shape. Indeed, if it's struck as a stake, it would've been done when the wax wasn't melted, otherwise the candle would've been broken.

"But what's the point of sticking a stake in and lighting it up?"

"Hmmm... Yep, it was out of the need to hold a ritual for sure..."

Tōru and Kōsuke stood a little further away from the body as they discussed.

Such a large candle can last for several hours if lit. They say that mixing a certain special oil in the wax of the candle, or replacing the candle wick for another material can also prolong or shorten the burning time of the candle. Maybe this candle is like that...

Yadorigi carefully observed the candle and discovered an interesting fact.

There should be a candle wick in the middle of the candle, but there isn't.

"Was the candle lit when the body was found?"

Yadorigi asked back.

"No," Tōru replied. "It wasn't."

There is no candle wick, but there are burn marks.

This means that there was a wick, but now it's burnt out.

It feels like there is a certain intention in it.

For example, if the length of the candle wick was specific— the fire would go out when the candle wick has burnt out.

It can be called an automatic flameout device.

A candle that can be extinguished at any time...

What an uncanny murder weapon.

This can't have nothing to do with the murder technique.

Yadorigi stood up, adjusted the position of his sunglasses, and looked around the floor.

The white fluid on the floor formed the shape of the wavy edge of crown like blood stains, scattered all around. It was formed after the molten wax liquid solidified. In the center of the circle, especially near the corpse, there are lots of white spots.

On closer inspection— **It appears that instead of splashing away after falling on the floor, part of the wax formed tiny spheres— or granules.** Rolling down on the ground, as if a necklace of pearls of various sizes had been torn apart.

"The murderer probably didn't bring a flashlight or a penlight."

Tōru said.

"Huh? Why do you say that?"

Kōsuke asked again.

"Wax drops are everywhere. which means that the killer was walking around with a lit candle. Then why did they do this? It's because the murderer didn't carry a flashlight, but relied on candles for lighting. From the estimated time of death. Judging that the murderer committed the murder almost at 5 PM, in this season, it was already dark at that time, so they were in a hurry to temporarily find candles to light them."

"Oh, I see! You're really smart!"

Wrong—

Yadorigi listened to the conversation between the two and said in his mind.

If the murderer was walking around with a candle in hand, the molten wax would drip from a height of one meter above the ground at most. In this case, the wax liquid would splash around the moment it falls on the floor, forming the shape of a crown. If it was falling from a higher place, then the wavy edge of the crown would cover an even larger area.

By examining the blood left at the crime scene carefully, a lot can be seen, such as how high the blood was dripping from, whether it was falling in motion or in a static state, in which direction it splashed, etc., it's the same if replaced by molten wax.

So— what exactly does the wax particles falling around the corpse mean.

Yadorigi looked around.

This gym has no boxes for spectators.

This means that.....

Yadorigi looked up at the ceiling and whispered:

"Got it."

"Eh?" Columbo rushed towards Yadorigi. "Did you just say 'Got it'? It was so natural. W-what did you find out?"

"The modus operandi or the crime." Yadorigi said to Columbo. "I was surprised by this idea myself. On one hand, I think it is an impossible idea... but on the other hand, its unpredictability seems to be the truth."

"Whaaa— for reals?"

Columbo began over-breathing and rolling all over the floor.

"Is it finally time for the resolution chapter?" Kōsuke said provocatively. "Then let's see what you can do, Detective."

"Ellery, stop talking to the body and come here."

Columbo called Ellery.

Ellery was squatting next to the body, with a blissful expression on her face, muttering incomprehensibly, only then did she return to the other members of Mystery Study Group in a reluctant manner.

"So—"

Yadorigi said.

"Woaaah! He really said 'So'! The great detective said 'So!'"

"Shuddup, idiot."

Kōsuke smacked Columbo in the head.

This seemed to hurt Colombo a lot. He used his hand wrapped in the sleeve to rub his head silently, waiting for Yadorigi to continue.

Yadorigi suddenly turned back and waved.

"I should say goodbye."

He intended to go to the outer corridor.

"Hey, wait wait!" Kōsuke grabbed Yadorigi's shoulder. "Where're you going! What do you mean goodbye? Aren't you about to solve the mystery in front of everyone."

"Huh? Do you want to hear me?"

"For sure! What kind of detective is there in the world who solves a case by himself and then goes back satisfied! you even lied to us and said something like 'I'll take care of it', and trying to leave right after you finished your own business?"

"...Ah, so this is not a send-off. I was wondering why you all bothered to get together. Hmm, I don't have much time... alright, I understand. I will explain."

"Why are you looking reluctant."

"Because I am in a hurry, even though I may not look like it."

"Ugh—, so irritating! You really are a selfish bastard..."

"Hey, Kōsuke." Columbo interrupted. "Don't blame Detective-san. Detectives like him are destined to be mysterious. like Akechi Kogorō, it was normal for him to disappear during an investigation by pretending to be sick. We are lucky this detective didn't do such a thing!"

"That's not a defense."

"Anyway!" Tōru said. "Let's go back to class, shall we? If this goes on, we'll really freeze into popsicles."

If possible, Yadorigi wanted to leave the school immediately, but he now has no choice but to continue accompanying them.

To move on, he should deal with the problem here as soon as possible.

Then, let this tribute come to a close.

No— the word tribute doesn't feel appropriate somehow.

He now vaguely understands the reason.

Yes, this is not a tribute, but revenge.

When the group of people walked into the classroom where the stove is located, they immediately noticed the abnormality and couldn't help but stop in their tracks.

—The air is freezing.

"Ah!" Columbo exclaimed and ran to the stove. "The fire! The fire is out! We've run out of kerosene!"

"Seriously... this is no different from being lost in the mountains!" Kōsuke's body trembled. "We have to wait in this severe cold weather until others find us..."

"Ah... Are we going to... die here..."

Ellery squatted down on the spot, opened the umbrella and hid her body in it, like a tortoise hiding in its shell.

"This is no joke, there is a real danger of freezing to death..." Tōru said with a pale face. "If we had at least left one candle burning, we might've been able to burn something to keep us warm..."

"Why didn't you say that earlier!"

"I didn't expect things to turn out like this!"

"Watch your temper around your seniors, You bastard!"

"I didn't lose my temper!"

"H-h-hey, don't panic!"

"Perverts should shut up!"

"H-huh? Tōru?"

"You do not need to panic like this, everyone." Yadorigi still maintained his usual composure to step in and mediate. "Making a fire is a simple thing, you all learned that during scout training, right? I am very good at making fires."

"If you had called the police earlier, things wouldn't have been like this in the first place!"

Kōsuke grabbed Yadorigi's chest.

Yadorigi's sunglasses fell to the ground, revealing his azure eyes. Kōsuke inexplicably felt a little embarrassed all of a sudden, and let go of him.

Yadorigi sighed lightly, picked up his sunglasses and put them on again.

"Let us go back to the gym first and collect all the larger candles there. It is no match for a stove, but it is better than not having anything for fire." Yadorigi continued as if nothing had happened. "Then we would better move to a smaller room."

"Okay, then everyone, hurry up and collect candles!" Columbo suddenly began to command. "We must stay alive and go home! Do you all hear me? We won't let anyone else die!"

"What's the use of being cool at a time like this? He's in such a good shape."

Kōsuke said helplessly.

"By the way, what about solving the mystery?"

Tōru asked.

"Ah, right, then let us talk about it in the gym."

Yadorigi and the members of the Mystery Study Group returned to the gym and began to pick up candles standing on the floor separately. Different kinds of candles can be lit for several hours. It's difficult to be used as a heating device, but it's better than nothing at all.

"It's too late to preserve the crime scene now."

Tōru said.

"Maybe forcing us to tamper with the crime scene like this is also part of the killer's plan, they are really smart. But the mystery of the case has been solved, so it is not a problem anymore."

Yadorigi said.

"Oh right, about this..." Columbo said as he tucked the candles all into the pockets of his sagging coat. "Are you ready to explain to us the truth of the case?"

"All right. About what really happened at this magic murder scene— I will explain it briefly."

Yadorigi gracefully spread his hands and walked over to the body. The Mystery Study Group couldn't help but stop their actions and stared fixedly at him, almost mesmerized.

"The key to solving this mystery is still left at this murder scene. And that key item is—"

"The burnt thread I found!"

Columbo held up a hand with the sleeve that was too long for him.

"Correct." Yadorigi said, pointing at him. "It is the thread Columbo-san found. Although there is not much left after it got burned, I believe it was actually a relatively longer thread before. It should have been set on fire by the murderer, intending to destroy the evidence. From this aspect, this is undoubtedly a very important piece of evidence."

"Speaking of threads in locked rooms, they can be used to lock the door from the outside by tying it to the door lock knob, right?"

Kōsuke tilted his head and said.

"It was not used for this purpose this time. As we have discussed before, it is difficult to determine whether there is a key to this locked room, so it is meaningless to lock it in this way. The thread must have had an alternative use."

"An alternate use?"

"In order to figure this out, we need to consider it in combination with other evidence. But— before that, let us explore a little further what else we can deduce from the burnt thread."

"What else is there?"

"The remaining thread fell at the crime scene, which means we can assume that **the murderer failed to remove it.**"

"Ehhh— really?" Kōsuke said with a frown. "Couldn't it just be that they didn't realize they dropped something?"

"The murderer tried to burn it to destroy the evidence, and in this case, there is no way they did not realize it was left at the scene."

"Ah, right."

"But to be precise, the murderer 'tried to destroy the evidence but did not burn it all', and they 'did not find it' are both true statements. So under what circumstances would the murderer encounter such a predicament?"

"Could he have been instructed to do so...?"

Columbo replied.

"I see, maybe the murderer had an accomplice. Indeed, if the accomplice was a relatively careless person, then the 'tried to destroy the evidence but did not burn it all', and 'did not find it' both work. Also, if the murderer did not confirm the crime scene with the accomplice, then it would make sense that they failed to collect the evidence. However, since the murderer had made such a careful plan, if the accomplice screwed up, it would not be consistent with the murderer's original intention."

"You mean there's no accomplice?"

"No, I cannot determine whether there is an accomplice or not, it is entirely possible that there is. But first, we have to reason on the premise that there is no accomplice. We will turn back to that line of reasoning only after we reason all possibilities and determine that an accomplice was necessary."

"But I don't think the murderer themselves could have missed the evidence they wanted to burn at the scene..."

"No, there is a possibility. Quite simply, **the murderer was not at the crime scene at the time**. When the line was burned, because

the murderer was elsewhere, they could neither confirm it nor take the evidence."

"What do you mean?" Tōru said with his arms crossed. "Grey died here. How did the murderer kill her if they weren't here?"

"It can be achieved by using some techniques. The theme of this case belongs to the 'remote murder' category type of locked rooms. The murderer was somewhere else, making sure they had an alibi, and at the same time killing Grey-san in the locked room."

"Is this really possible? What kind of technique was it?"

"Then let us examine a few pieces of evidence scattered on the crime scene."

- Burnt thread
- Burnt paper
- Candles on the gym floor
- The candle that served as the murder weapon
- Spherical wax particles that had fallen around the body

"I got close to the core of the murder technique once I noticed the wax particles that fell around the body. Please take a look."

Yadorigi picked up a sphere-shaped wax particle that was beside his feet.

This small wax sphere is only a few centimeters in diameter.

"This is... wax melted then solidified, right?"

Ellery crouched beside the body and said.

"Exactly. However, wax dripping from a height of about a meter will generally splatter on the floor and form a crown-shaped stain. If it is dripped from a higher place, the stain left will be wider on the floor. So, under what circumstances does the melted wax not splatter on the floor, but solidify into a small sphere?"

"Is this even possible.....?"

Kōsuke stared at Yadorigi with suspicion.

"It could be for a candle. For example, **if the melted wax dropped down from a height of more than 1 meter, or higher... like a height of 5 or 10 meters, it is possible that it froze mid-air as it fell on the floor..**"

"A height of 10 meters..."

Led by Columbo, everyone looked up at the ceiling of the gymnasium. The ceiling should be at least 10 meters high.

"This pearl-like evidence tells us that **the candle was burning near the ceiling.**"

"No no no, how is this possible! How did the murderer climb up to the ceiling? Did they climb up the wall, along the beams, all the way above the body? And they also had to hold a candle in one hand? That's too stupid."

"No, the murderer did not need to climb up with the candle, they just let the candle go up near the ceiling by itself."

"Huuuh? The more you talk, the more I don't understand. Why did they want the candle to go up near the ceiling?"

"To kill Grey-san."

Yadorigi's fingertip pointing to the ceiling moved down towards the victim's body, and then, as if to attract everyone's attention, he gestured towards the candle that had pierced the body's abdomen.

"Ellery-san explained just now that the end of the candle that served as the murder weapon may have been sharpened, or a sharp object had been embedded in it to make it easier to pierce the body. It was not driven in by a pile, Instead, **it fell from high up and stabbed into Grey-san, who was lying on her back on the floor.**"

"Whaaa?"

"Let me explain in detail the mechanism involved in this killing technique. In three words— hot air balloon."

"Wh-wha da? Ho ai bawoo?"

Columbo was too shocked to speak coherently.

"You all should have understood now, all the evidences left here describe this murder technique. The first is the burnt paper, we can get insight from it and know that the raw material of the balloon was paper, yes, it was a paper hot air balloon, and if you

think that paper hot air balloons cannot fly, then you are wrong. There is an **annual festival** in Thailand. On the day of the full moon on the last month of the lunar calendar, people make hot air balloons made of paper in the shape of lanterns, and then release them together. Light and heat-insulating paper is a good material for hot air balloons."

"They made a balloon out of paper from a spell book?"

"Well... I think lighter and thinner paper was actually used, and the paper scattered around the body was thrown there to confuse our sight, so that the paper used to make the balloon is mixed in there and hard to find."

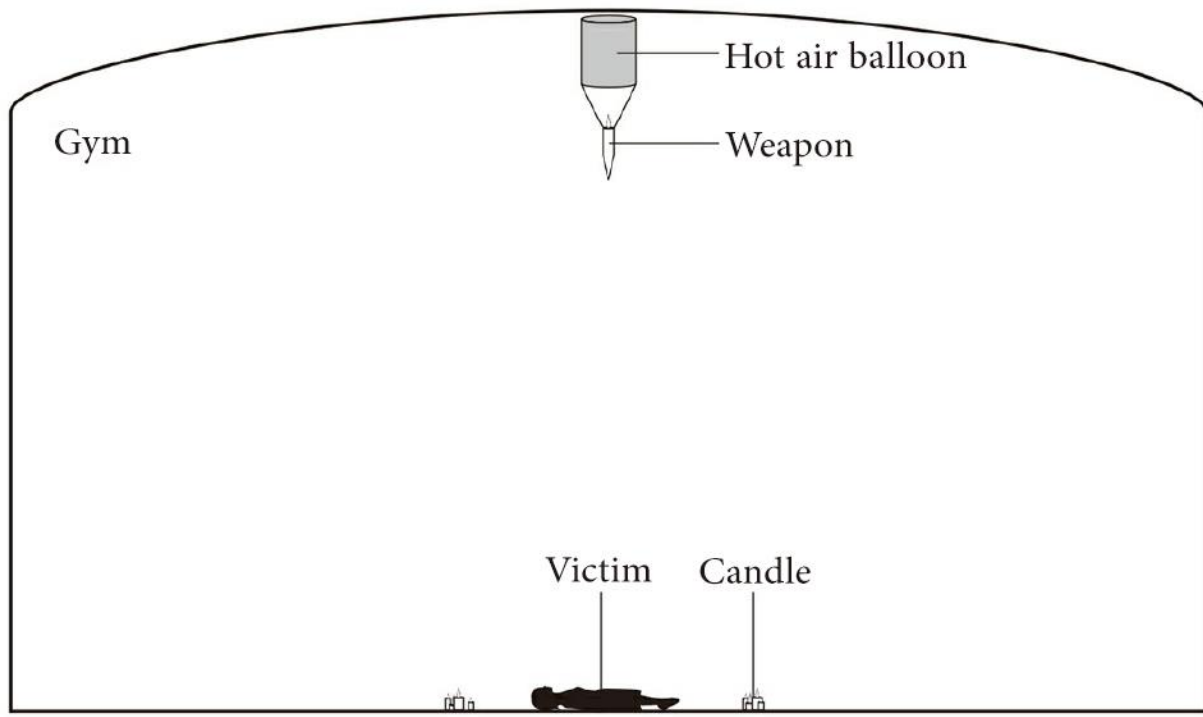
"What was that thread used for?"

"To tie the balloon and its fuel together. I think you should have already figured out that the fuel was that candle, the one that served as the murder weapon. The candle heated the air, and the hot air filled the paper balloon, creating a pressure difference between the air inside and outside of the balloon, causing it to float."

"In other words, the weapon that stabbed Grey to death was also the fuel that made the hot air balloon float, right?"

"Yes, Kōsuke-san is right. This murder weapon used itself as fuel and was carried up by the hot air balloon to the ceiling. But can it really float? Let us make a rough calculation. Suppose the candle weighed about the same as a survival knife, about 500 grams. In the zero degree Celsius external temperature case, if you want it to float, you need to let the air inside the 4m³ balloon to reach a

temperature of 30 degrees. Since 4m^3 is already quite large, it was necessary to reduce the weight of the murder weapon or to raise the temperature of the air higher. Although it is only a simple calculation, it is not impossible to achieve. The actual temperature should have been much lower, the terrain and weather affect the air pressure. Taking all this into consideration, it may be possible to get a different answer. In any case, choosing the gym in the deep mountains as the crime scene must have been precisely because it meets the conditions for using this murder technique.”



Kareobana Academy Technique

"Got it, got it. It floated up, yeah? What's next? A weapon that's up high to the ceiling, now you gotta shoot it down, right?"

"You do not have to shoot it down specifically. The candle wick was designed to only have a certain length, and the candle should have naturally got extinguished after a period of time. What happened after the fire was extinguished? **The hot air balloon lost its buoyancy and turned to a murder weapon that fell to Grey-san directly below.**"

"Right... as long as the murderer let the balloon go up, even if they left the scene, the weapon automatically fell to kill the victim."

Kōsuke seemed to finally understand.

"Yes. To do this, the victim must be kept still, so the murderer most likely gave her sleeping pills to make her fall asleep."

"No, wait, where did the hot air balloon go after that, we didn't see it when we stepped into this place."

"I think the end of the candle wick may have been tampered with, and let sparks fly around at the end. Also, the balloon and thread were most likely coated with an alcohol-like liquid to make it easier to burn. Just like that, the balloon and thread would burn together while the candle was burning out. The candles on the floor are a safety device. If the paper falls on the lit candles, all the evidence would be burned. Maybe the murderer thought so. However, there was still a bit of the resulting line left."

"This kind of ritual-like performance effect turned out to be all in service of the murder." Columbo said with emotion. "B-but in this case, the murderer—"

"Yes, this killing technique is automatic, and it can be activated even if the murderer is not present. In this way, while creating a locked room, it can also ensure that the murderer has an alibi. For example, if the time to burn the candle was set to four hours. In this case, you only need to ensure that you have an alibi four hours after setting up this mechanism. In turn, **we can say that the person who can ensure that they have an alibi with the help of this killing technique is the murderer.**"

"Then..." Columbo stared at the members of the Mystery Study Group in a panic. "Is the murderer one of you?"

"You're also one of us, okay?"

Kōsuke said.

"Don't say such stupid things! Aren't we good friends? We even played 'The Inugami Clan' and 'The Village with Eight Graves' together! Why would things turn out like this..."

"...Is there any chance that... what Detective-san said was wrong...?"

Ellery said with a slight trembling.

"That is right. It must be confirmed by precise experiments first, otherwise it is difficult to say whether this technique can work. Therefore, please allow me to reserve the answer for the time being." Yadorigi said, adjusting the position of his sunglasses.

"Okay, that is all I have to say. Have you collected almost all the candles? Then let us go."

"Ah, hey!"

Yadorigi ignored Kōsuke's protest and went out of the gym alone. The members of the Mystery Study Group followed him in dejection.

They all kept their lips tightly closed and said nothing. Now is not the time to gossip, because a person around them might be the murderer. And, they have to endure hunger and cold under this condition.

The group walked along the corridor, and Yadorigi, who is at the front, suddenly stopped. The soulless Columbo slammed into his back and fell on his rear.

"Ah, sorry, are you okay?"

Yadorigi stretched out his hand, and Columbo held his hand gratefully then stood up, without letting go for a while.

"Hey, inspector pervert, what're you doing?" Kōsuke called out from behind. "Stuck in traffic?"

"No inspector has that name." Columbo said, finally letting go.

"Detective-san, what happened? Why did you suddenly stop—"

"Do you hear that?"

"Huh?"

"Please listen carefully."

Everyone listened carefully as he said. Amidst the sound of wind, there is some kind of low noise coming from far away.

The noise got louder and louder.

"Could this... be..."

Led by Yadorigi, everyone looked out the window.

Above the black silhouette of the mountains, red and white lights flickered.

"It's a UFO!"

"Shit, He's serious... Get a grip, Columbo, that's a helicopter, a helicopter!"

Kōsuke ran in the direction of the entrance gate, with Yadorigi and the others following behind.

They passed through the gate and came to the yard covered with snow.

A strong cold wind is blowing outside. The sound of the helicopter's propeller rotating can be heard clearly, it's definitely not an auditory hallucination or an illusion.

"The helicopter was called by you, Detective-san?"

Tōru said.

"No... I do not know how."

The helicopter flew straight towards this side, and as it got closer, it seemed to gradually decrease its altitude. Its destination is indeed here.

"Someone must've called the police after discovering the landslide! Great, we're saved!" Kōsuke waved his flashlight towards the sky. "Heyyyy— this way!"

The helicopter finally stopped over the yard and began to descend slowly. The white fuselage is clearly visible in the darkness. However, there are no identification marks on the helicopter.

The wind pressure from the helicopter sent the snow in the yard flying like a blizzard. Ellery's umbrella was blown over by the wind, but she didn't care, waving happily at the helicopter.

—Should you all really be happy?

Yadorigi couldn't be optimistic.

There are no residents nearby, so it's impossible to find the landslide this quickly, and it's still late at night, so even if one wanted to send a helicopter, they would usually wait until dawn.

An ominous premonition.

Despite Yadorigi's worries, the helicopter landed in the center of the yard.

Who in the world will come out...

Yadorigi and the others held their breath and stared at the rear hatch of the helicopter.

The propeller of the helicopter is still spinning for a while, without any change.

It wasn't the rear door that opened— but the cockpit door.

The person who poked his head out of the cockpit is a small child no matter how you look at him. This little boy, who looks like a foreigner, is wearing a suit vest and shorts, sitting in the cockpit of the helicopter, his cocked-up soft hair blowing about under the wind pressure of the propeller and flying through the air.

"Salvador-san, right?"

The boy shouted to the people gathered in the yard, his voice was carried with the wind.

"No, I'm Columbo!"

"Not you." Kōsuke puts on a **tsukkomi** act from the side. "The detective uncle, right?"

Yadorigi kept one hand in front of his eyes and took a step forward against the strong wind created by the helicopter.

"You are?"

"I'm the messenger of Samidare Yui-san."

"And your name is?"

"Name? Is it that necessary?"

"Please tell me."

"It's Licorne now."

"I have never heard of a messenger like you."

"She didn't explain to you? Another companion is in charge of the remaining six locked rooms, and that companion is me. I thought

you might have run into trouble, so I flew over here. Would you like a ride?"

"Samidare-san told you to come?"

"No, it's my own judgment."

What are his intentions?

Yadorigi didn't know what to think of this.

"I have a question that concerns me very much, may I ask you?"

"Please do."

The teenager nodded with a smile.

"Samidare-san usually carries a character pendant on her satchel. What is the name of that character? Since you are samidare-san's companion, you should know it, right?"

"Ah, if so, the answer is simple. Yui-san usually carries a backpack, she doesn't have a satchel."

—That should have been an easy bait to take.

Even though the question was answered, it deepened Yadorigi's suspicion of the boy even more.

"You are really very cautious, Salvador-san. But it's okay, I'm just acting for my companion. Alright then, please get on the helicopter, and the few of you over there too, before you all turn into frozen corpses."

After some hesitation, Yadorigi decided to board the helicopter.

If he was by himself, there would've been many ways to go back, like calling for rescue after getting down the mountain, which was his plan at first. But the fact that he would leave them here again after the stove is no longer working would make him feel guilty.

The appearance of the helicopter was a real blessing, so that everyone is able to leave this closed environment, just like a movie, it's too much of a coincidence.

Because of this, one should remain vigilant.

However, for Yadorigi, the benefits this would bring him were enough to dispel his suspicions.

This will allow him to get closer to the behind-the-scenes of the Crime Victims' Relief Committee more quickly and reliably.

At dawn.

The members of the Mystery Study Group are sitting on the seats facing each other, with mixed expressions and without saying a word. Everyone is wearing noise-proof headsets, but no one spoke through the device, probably because they feel heavy-hearted and tired thinking about the case.

"Thank you all for taking this flight. This is Captain Licorne."

Suddenly Licorne's voice came from the headset.

"What's going on?"

Columbo looked around.

"I will be taking you all on an air ride next. **However, after this helicopter lands, only four of the five of you will be able to leave.**"

"What?"

Kōsuke looked into the cockpit, and Licorne was maneuvering the helicopter with an innocent expression, as if it has nothing to do with him.

"The person who can't leave is the murderer of the 'Kareobana Academy' murder case."

"What the...?"

"His name is— Tōru Uchida-san, it's you."

"Captain! Please stop talking nonsense!"

Columbo finally stood up and said.

"Why play this little captain act with him, Columbo." Kōsuke said while holding him down. "Forget about the killer for a moment, there's one thing that concerns me more than this nonsense, how can a kid fly a helicopter? He shouldn't have a pilot's license!"

"This is the end of the captain's greetings; I wish you all a happy flight—"

Licorne still has his back turned to this side, waving a hand.

"What is up with... that boy." Ellery said, biting her lower lip. "So cute..."

"It's like this every time—" Kōsuke punched the cushion of the helicopter seat. "Hey, Tōru, say something too, someone's gotta be the tsukkomi around here."

"Kōsuke, sorry..." Tōru sat still, lowering his head deeply. "I never knew if I should say it... But now I made up my mind. What the kid said is true, I'm the murderer."

"Ehhh!"

Columbo and others yelled in surprise at the same time.

"I was going to say it whenever we leave the abandoned academy, but I didn't expect to be able to leave so soon, I haven't sorted out my emotions yet..."

"Hey, is this a lie? hey, Tōru?"

"No, it's true. Detective-san already knows it, he probably just didn't name me because he is a nice guy."

"Not really." Yadorigi sighed and shook his head. "I could not conclude that you are the murderer, but I did think you are more likely to be the murderer than others."

"Is that so..."

"What the fuck is this, is there any basis for you to say that?"

Kōsuke retorted.

"Yes." Yadorigi spread his hands. "It can be deduced from the killing technique used by the murderer. The murderer tried to use this method to ensure that he has an alibi, so the person who

deliberately created an alibi for himself is the murderer, very simple logic."

"Wait, if we're talking about creating alibis, then Columbo and I are also suspicious. We played Mājan together, yeah? I called him there. That means I'm also a suspect."

"No, the point of the problem is different. The key issue is, the time that passed before the body was discovered, **and who was able to control this length of time**. To put it more simply, **it was the black letter that notified you about the incident**, who was the person who found it? The later the letter is discovered, the later the body would be found. In this case, it would make guessing the time of death of the deceased more difficult. Moreover, all of you are students, not professional doctors. As time goes by, it would become more and more impossible to infer the correct time of death. Therefore, the body must be found as early as possible. For this reason, the letter informing the incident must be found as early as possible. However, there was no person who happened to find the letter that day, **so the murderer decided to be that person himself...** that is what happened."

"Ugh..."

Kōsuke was speechless and leaned on his seat helplessly.

"Naruko Rei was a criminal." Tōru began his monologue. "She's actually a member of the Black Magic Study Group. Yes, she is a spy. Under the banner of Black Magic, she secretly did a lot of illegal and criminal things to spread the reputation of the Black Magic Study Group. She was one of them. Do you remember that

my sister died in a car accident last year? That was done by her. she only cut the brake wires, she didn't do it directly. But, isn't this the same as killing? And after Naruko knew that the Mystery Group and the Black Magic Group were hostile, she got involved as a spy. If she was allowed to continue like this, who knows what would happen, maybe the others would be killed by her just like my sister... When I thought of this, I felt that I have to do something."

According to Tōru's confession, he completed the mechanism preparations at the crime scene at around 9 PM, which is the estimated time of the victim's death, and lit the candle. After that, he left the gym, locked the door, and drove back to the university on a motorcycle in the snow.

And 4 hours later, he came to the university, pretended to have found the letter, and contacted Columbo. Just at that moment, the mechanism was activated, and the sharp candle fell towards Grey who was unconscious in the gym—

"Tōru, you... why didn't you tell us about your sister."

"I didn't know before! Someone told me the truth recently, that my sister was actually killed by the Black Magic Study Group...."

"Was it the Crime Victim' Relief Committee?"

Yadorigi asked.

"Do you know them?... As expected from Detective-san. The detective summoned to me shouldn't have been so high-ranked, I didn't expect that the person who would come would be you, and

to be honest, I was taken aback. A rank '2' detective can't be found everywhere, so I'm not surprised at the results."

"Tōru! You—" Columbo stood up suddenly and slapped Tōru with the long sleeved hand. "I don't know who instigated you to do this, but why didn't you ask us for help instead of going to them! Are we not good partners? We played 'The Inugami Clan' and 'The Village with Eight Graves' together, have you forgotten that?!"

"Senpai... I've always hated your incomprehensible and annoying personality..."

"Eh? Eh? Tōru?"

"Tōru... as a same-year classmate... as a partner... I have something to tell you..."

Ellery said.

"What is it?"

"...Please return the money I lent you."

"...Yes."

The sky began to lighten gradually.

In the heavy air, the helicopter flew lightly under the clear bright sky.

After the members of the Mystery Study Group spent more than 24 hours in the abandoned academy, perhaps out of a sense of peace of mind that they were free from the incident, all of them

drifted off to sleep all of a sudden, even Tōru is already asleep and snoring.

"Licorne-san, can you hear me?"

Yadorigi looked out the window and said.

"What's the matter? I'm the captain, I can hear you."

"Who on earth are you? Have you been spying on us from somewhere?"

"I don't have that kind of interest."

"You actually knew who the murderer is then."

"Salvador-san, the structure of this series of events is much simpler than you think. Take a look inside Tōru's pocket for example."

"Now what?"

Yadorigi protested. But he did as the boy said and looked in the back pocket of Tōru's jeans. There is a wallet in the pocket.

"There's a student ID in the wallet, right? His birthday is May 5th, Taurus."

"Yes, looks like it..."

Yadorigi looked at Tōru's student ID.

The boy is right.

Kirigiri Kyōko was particularly concerned about the birthdays of the people involved as well.

Do the cases have anything to do with birthdays...

"Ah!" Yadorigi recalled the 'Kareobana' murder case and noticed a fact. "So that's how it is."

Everything is strung together by a thread.

The secret that the twelve locked rooms share—

"This makes me once again realize the tedium of the known and the charm of the unknown, that's just how the world is."

"Gee... I did not expect you to be a romantic. I feel like we will get along well. Do you want to have dinner together next time—"

"Is this how you hit on kids?"

"No way." Yadorigi said with a wry smile. "It is a complete misunderstanding, do not look at it like this, I am— no, let us just drop that."

The sun rises over the horizon.

No matter whose life is gone, a new day will still come.

"By the way, Licorne-san, about the destination of this helicopter... can you fly to the place I mentioned?"

Twins Ability Development Institute – Kirigiri Kyōko

"It's about time you let me off."

Said Kirigiri in the back seat.

Her unsentimental cold tone irritated Tsutsumi. Absolutely abhorrent. Detective or not, bratty kids like her are annoying. What kind of education did she grow up in to be such a kid?—

As if venting the anger in his heart, Tsutsumi stepped on the gas pedal, and the scenery outside the car window quickly swept back. Soon, the field road at night turned into an exhilarating view.

"The sea or the mountains, which one do you choose?"

Tsutsumi asked Kirigiri through the rearview mirror.

A small wrinkle creased between Kirigiri's eyebrows, silently looking back at Tsutsumi.

"Don't you want me to let you off? The sea or the mountains, which one do you choose?"

"Here is fine."

"That's not going to work, little detective lady." Tsutsumi increased the speed of the car. "Do you... know that **Samidare Yui** girl?"

Kirigiri made a clear reaction to the name.

It's a look permeated with hostility.

She had never shown this an expression before.

"I knew it. She's such a shameful girl, that Samidare Yui. She can't solve her own cases, so she sent a brat like you to me as a barking dog?"

"Does that mean you're..." Kirigiri said with a suddenly realized expression. **"Giving up trying to hide your crime?—"**

"It's a change of plan, I'm going to kill you."

"Is that so."

"You have something to do with the detective in charge. I can't just let you go. that would be like letting the information of the case out. In short, as long as I kill you, I can start over. Which will buy me a lot of time. "

"I will call the police before that."

"I told you in advance, the phone isn't working, and the shielding device is in the trunk of the car."

Kirigiri checked the phone, and then threw it on the seat. As long as it remains in this car, it will keep showing no signal.

"Is it okay to do this kind of unplanned **improvisation?**"

"You better worry about yourself. Do you still think you can get away? Your knees are shaking with fear, aren't they?"

"No, on the contrary, I feel relaxed."

"What did you say?"

"It was uncomfortable to pretend I didn't find out you are the killer all the time I was alone in the car with you."

"Ha, bullshit, you never thought I'm the murderer. If you had known, you would have avoided being alone with me."

"If you think that's the only level of perception I have, then I suggest you change your mind quickly. As long as it's to get the truth, I can bet my life without hesitation."

Not only did she not tremble, but she retorted so boldly.

Tsutsumi couldn't help but gauge her expression.

Her eyes, which seems to penetrate everything, are gazing at him through the rearview mirror.

"S-stop acting tough, brat."

Tsutsumi said fiercely, looking away.

"Are you sure you're not the one acting tough? What are you going to do in this situation? You are driving and can't do anything else, while I'm directly behind you and ready to do whatever I want."

"You're the one who should think more about it. If I have trouble driving, you won't have a good time either. Besides, at this speed, you can't get out of the car, right?"

"Yes, but how long can this speed be maintained."

Kirigiri smiled and said, leaning her back on the back seat, as if deliberately showing her calmness.

Tsutsumi gritted his teeth and did not respond to her provocation.

What she said was true. While driving, Tsutsumi can't do anything to her. However, as long as he can maintain a certain speed, she is also unable to make a move on him.

In this small enclosed space, the two of them are unintentionally sharing a destiny.

However, this is based on a very delicate balance. As soon as the car slows down, that balance will break immediately, and Kirigiri will take action. Even if the car hit a guardrail, as long as the speed isn't too fast, the damage won't be too serious. Or there is another way, she can open the car door and jump out by herself.

Altogether, the current speed must be maintained.

As long as the speed of the car does not drop, she can do nothing.

Fortunately, there are few traffic lights and turns on this field road. Since the snow hasn't melted, the road is more slippery, but there is no problem in driving in a straight line.

"When I was a student, I was a well-known drag racer, I'm not slowing down any further."

"Where do you plan to take me?"

"Heaven."

"Is that so."

Tsutsumi thought he answered quite cleverly, but the girl reacted indifferently.

—On second thought, he himself doesn't know where he is going.

Where is the end point?

What would happen after that, if we keep driving like this?

Letting go of the gas pedal will result in Kirigiri slipping away, but she can't do anything if he continues to drive.

Isn't this... a dilemma?

What can be done to break this stalemate and defeat Kirigiri?

His hands are sweaty holding the steering wheel.

Why did things turn out like this?

Tsutsumi cursed in his mind. I should've known that I shouldn't have gotten carried away and say the 'kill' word. I was very frustrated with Kirigiri's attitude... and I blurted out. To be honest, I underestimated her too much. I thought she is just a kid who would be too scared to speak out if she is scared, but that's not the case at all.

Or should I say nothing, take her deep into the mountains and let her off, then sneak up and kill her?

No, I can't imagine succeeding with that.

Tsutsumi remembered that he had once been thrown over by her at the Institute. That's right, you can't just approach her casually. It's a different matter if I had a gun in my hand, but of course I don't. Can I beat her with my bare hands? No matter how you look at it, the opponent is just a soft little girl, there is no way that I can't beat her...

In any case, at this point, there is no way to attack her directly.

Is there any good solution?

The opponent is now sitting in the back seat, looking out the window blankly, with a calm attitude, as if waiting for the taxi to arrive at the destination.

I hate it...

Tsutsumi planned to jerk the steering wheel to scare Kirigiri, but he dismissed the idea a moment before he did so.

Being emotional wouldn't do you any good.

Clam down.

Calm down and you should be able to find the answer.

Tsutsumi concentrated on driving, staring at the road ahead.

Something is written on a sign on the side of the road.

—A highway entrance!

"Great!"

Tsutsumi could not help but exclaim.

He glanced at the rearview mirror tremblingly, Kirigiri still looking outside, her expression unchanged, just like a doll. It makes him worry about whether she had been replaced by a real doll unknowingly, her long eyelashes are still flapping up and down, so she is clearly not a doll.

Tsutsumi changed lanes intending to drive onto the highway.

As soon as I get on the tollway, the car's speed will stabilize, so I don't have to worry about hitting a red light, and Kirigiri will not be able to easily get out of the car.

"You want to get on the highway."

Kirigiri said.

"Yeah, rejoice, we'll go faster."

"Will the gas hold up?"

"Ah!"

He couldn't help but yelp.

He almost forgot.

The needle of the gas gauge is pointing to E.

Running out of gas on the highway is no fun.

But there is no turning back now. Tsutsumi drove the car to the highway. He was worried that he might get stuck at the toll booth because he doesn't have the ETC card with him, but he was able to get onto the highway lane without any problem.

"Good thing there are no toll booths."

Kirigiri said as if she can read Tsutsumi's mind.

"I never lose when it matters."

The speed increased further.

The feeling of gravitational acceleration pressing the body is very pleasant.

Tsutsumi likes this feeling. It's an ominous thrill, like a premonition of death. When he lost his family, he often tested the limits of his speed with the intention of dying. When a certain speed is exceeded, there comes a moment when one doesn't know whether they are alive or dead. He wanted to savor that moment, so he raced again and again.

This is probably the so-called destructive impulse.

Tsutsumi analyzed himself.

On that day, I lost my family and was completely despaired of everything in this world. I thought about dying a lot, but I didn't die.

Because I still had concerns.

That is to take revenge on the people who took the lives of my family.

The Kyūren Brothers—

Those twins were literally two demons.

They were involved in many crimes using their twin characteristics. Through the investigation by the Crime Victims' Relief Committee, Tsutsumi learned that **they were not registered as twins in their household registration**. Society didn't treat them as twins, they were both one person named 'Shikon Kyūren'.

A normal person might think that their situation was bad and their survival was difficult. But from a criminal's point of view, this situation is really enviable.

They were never arrested for whatever crime they committed because, **when one of the twins committed a crime, the other created an alibi and were thus able to prove their innocence.**

Simply put, they are a criminal who has the ability to self-replicate.

They got this convenience thanks to their father. Their father was a habitual fraud and robbery offender, and immediately thought that he could 'use' his twin sons when they were born. And, as their father wanted, they became a pair of criminals. Their father was soon killed when his accomplices imploded, but the demonic twins stayed in this world.

7 years ago, Tsutsumi's wife was working at the post office when the twins suddenly broke into the office. One of the twins shot and killed several people, including Tsutsumi's wife. According to the information provided by the witnesses, the suspect was identified as 'Shikon Kyūren', but he had sufficient alibi, and the police failed to arrest him.

Not only did they commit several blatant robberies, they also often used their twins identity to commit fraud, such as claiming to research institutions that they had the unique ability to sense between twins, allowing them to do research on themselves and collect high remunerations. Of course, they didn't have any sensing abilities, they were just faking it. After the experiments are over, they disappear. I heard that they were mainly defrauding payments abroad like this.

In any case, they are no longer in this world.

Finally, I personally sent them to hell.

—And yet.

For some reason, I don't feel I'm saved at all.

On the contrary, I'm being hunted down.

Tsutsumi looked in the rearview mirror.

It's her fault.

After all, I can't really say I'm saved until I've completed the game.

"Let me say a cliché." Kirigiri said, looking through the rearview mirror. "You have a chance to start your life over. But as long as you remain on this path, there will be no salvation ahead."

"What do you know!"

"I don't know your past, but I know your future. You will definitely not have any good outcome, so you need to quit the game right now and change your own destiny."

"I have reached this point, I can't turn back." Tsutsumi said with a mocking smile. "Don't forget, you are also part of this destiny, so shut up if you understand that."

Kirigiri fell into silence as he said.

The sound of the car made his heart tighten.

This silence soon became overwhelming for him.

"What's your detective rank?"

He asked.

However, Kirigiri did not answer.

"Fine, I take it back, you can talk."

"...There is no point in asking about my rank."

"Just tell me."

"7."

"Huh? the same as Samidare Yui?"

She looks like a child no matter how you look at it, I thought her rank is lower.

Although the perpetrator of the 'Black Challenge' cannot choose the summoned detective, they can at least know the name of their opponent before committing the crime. Of course, they can also search the files in the Detective Library based on the name. Naturally, Tsutsumi investigated the detective who was going to confront him.

"What's your specialty?"

Tsutsumi asked to the back seat.

"Murder cases."

"Murder cases? A kid like you is a detective specializing in murder cases?"

"It's just the classification of the Detective Library, it's not for me to decide."

Her specialty is murder cases, and her rank is '7', which means that she had more or less solved cases and has a track record.

Indeed, her actions in the institute were quite different from ordinary people. I should've asked her earlier, then taken the appropriate measures in advance—

"Have you solved the mystery of the locked room?"

"Yes."

"...You're lying, right?"

"That doesn't matter to you, you're going to kill me anyway, aren't you?"

"That's right..."

Did she really solve the case?

Is this technique completely effortless to crack for a rank '7' detective?

He wants to ask for some information for future reference when dueling Samidare Yui.

"You absolutely can't solve the mystery of the Ultimate Locked Room, because the locked room was created using the 'Corsican Brothers' phenomenon and there is no answer. Or are you planning to tell me that it was caused by a paranormal phenomenon?"

"The idea that when one of the twins is stabbed to death, the other one who is in another place dies due to the same cause... is an interesting one, but it can't happen."

"So you're going to bring out the master key again?"

"No master key was needed."

"But if you want to kill Kyūren Shikon in Room L, you must break through the locked doors, and the two doors were locked with padlocks 'A' and 'B', right? There were only two people who could've opened the doors with fingerprints and they were drinking together in the sub building, they testified that they were in the room. How would you explain that?"

"What's the point of explaining it to the one who did it."

"I want to hear you say it yourself."

"Is that so." Kirigiri sighed softly. "Before that, can I ask you a question?"

"I won't answer boring questions."

"You accepted the invitation of the Crime Victims' Relief Committee to create this murder case, am I right? Did you choose the technique used in the case yourself? Or did they force one on you?"

"What's wrong with that?"

According to the rules of the 'Black Challenge', the challenger can freely choose the technique used in the case. These techniques have corresponding expenses. The rank of the detective called will depend on the total amount of expenses. The higher the expenses, the higher the rank of the detective called. Tsutsumi was no exception. He chose the technique himself, but—

"If the 'Ultimate Locked Room' was forced, then I feel sorry for you, and if you chose it yourself, then you are too naïve."

"What are you trying to say?"

"The Ultimate Locked Room does not exist. This is the answer."

"Stop bullshitting, didn't you see it? It can only be described as the Ultimate Locked Room."

"No, as far as I can see, that room is not the Ultimate Locked Room at all. If that kind of locked room really exists, then I would love to see it."

"You can't be serious..."

Tsutsumi vented his emotions by stepping on the accelerator.

"It goes without saying that you also know the 'Black Challenge' is a game where the perpetrator and the detective confront each other which is different from the usual murder case. The murder weapons and techniques prepared by the perpetrator can be compared to poker, with what cards the perpetrator has in their hand being partly disclosed in the challenge. At the same time, the bet money is also listed. The detective prepares their own cards based on this information."

"Why mention this all of a sudden?"

"Do you know how to win in poker?"

"Isn't it just overpowering the opponent's cards by using stronger ones."

"Yes, this is the straightforward approach. But there is more than one method, especially when it comes to high stakes gambling. There is a very effective method, and it is— **to get the opponent to withdraw from the game.**"

The car sped up more and more.

Tsutsumi himself began to lose control of the speed of the car.

"There are many ways to make your opponent quit the game, but the most basic is to bluff and **make the opponent psychologically think they can't win.** For example, if you continue to increase the amount of the bet money, the opponent may be discouraged by the high risk and deliberately avoid it. What if the cards on the table look like a straight flush? And what if the stakes are substantial? Normally, your opponent would think they have no choice but to quit the game."

"So why are you mentioning this!"

"That's what you're playing at in this case." Kirigiri replied lightly.

"The bet money is half a billion, and the cards on the field show signs of the 'Ultimate Locked Room' equivalent of a royal flush—this is how you planned to let the detective out of the game."

Tsutsumi is speechless.

Unrelenting, Kirigiri continued:

"The locked room of the 'Twin Ability Research Institute' is one of the twelve locked rooms that challenged the detective Samidare Yui. Generally speaking, it's impossible to solve twelve locked room murder cases within 168 hours, which requires the

detective to show extraordinary speed. In this case, if there is a challenge letter labeled 'Ultimate Locked Room' with a cost of 561 million yen, the detective will probably put it on hold for the time being and solve it later. When taking exams, students usually find it easier to solve the questions they are stuck at last. In this way, with this question temporarily set aside, the detective will be frustrated on the other cases and run out of time... This is the ending you expected. **Simply put, your real intention is to use the 'Ultimate Locked Room' to bluff and make the detective quit the game."**

That's right--

Tsutsumi regretted it.

He didn't regret that he chose the 'Twin Ability Research Institute' card, but he regretted that he didn't deal with Kirigiri Kyōko earlier.

I knew I should have killed her when she appeared in front of me. Although Hoshī might have witnessed me killing her, so I would've had to kill Hoshī as well, and if she died, it would've impacted the technique too much.

I did expect that detectives would be split up to solve the cases, but I did not expect that the detective would appear this early, and that they would be such **a capable person**.

"To some extent, the 'Ultimate Locked Room' may refer to **the locked room that can never be opened**. In fact, the locked room this time might succeed without opening it. In this sense, what

you bought was indeed the 'Ultimate Locked Room', but in the end, it was just an **imaginary** 'Ultimate Locked Room'."

What the fuck, damn it.

Not enough time, and half a million yen locked room. Normally people would opt to quit, right?...

"By the way, by raising the 'Ultimate Locked Room' banner, some detectives would be overjoyed to jump on the bandwagon. If you want to know why you failed, it's because you didn't understand the psychology of detectives, I was more or less attracted to the 'Ultimate Locked Room' label..."

"Heyhey, you think you have won? you haven't solved the mystery of the locked room at all."

"Are you talking about the locked room that is equivalent to a pair hand pretending to be a royal flush?"

"Why do you say it like this... a pair also has a chance to win, right?"

"Unfortunately, I still have a few trump cards in my hand."

"Then you should play your cards already."

"Padlocks with fingerprint authentication, doors sealed by chains, the 'Corsican Brothers' phenomenon, a ghost covered in white cloth— these are all just to make the appearance of the case more complicated, it was all a bluff. the technique itself is classic and unexpected."

"Say it then."

"You said that after the simple experiment at 6 PM, you used chains and padlocks to lock the twins in room L and room R, right? The key to this technique lies in the actions at that time. In short, **you only pretended to wrap the chains around the door handles to lock it.** The point is where you hang the padlock on the chain. If you hang the padlock on the two adjacent chain buckles, the padlock is almost meaningless. For example, just fold a long chain in half from the middle, wrap it around the door handle, and then hang the padlock on the buckle near the middle of the half-folded chain and lock the padlock. At first glance, the chain and the padlock look like they seal the door, but as long as you untangle the chains, the door can be opened easily."

Chains, padlocks, fingerprint authentication, sealed double-doors... everything is the same as Kirigiri said, a bluff. These were all small tricks to make the locked room look tighter and stronger, but in principle, it's as simple as 'pretending to lock the door, but it isn't'. Although the door wasn't physically locked, these elements add up to have that effect, creating a psychological locked room. The chains on the R side were rewound to make the room look robust. If the chains were unlocked and left in the corridor, it would have created a sense of laxity. In particular, 'D' can be locked again, so after the crime was completed, the killer rewrapped the chains and actually locked the door, thus creating the impression that 'A' and 'B' were physically locked from the beginning.

I originally thought that after the detective appears, I can also use the frontal attack technique to delay time...

"Is there something you want to refute?"

Kirigiri said. Annoyingly, she looks as if she is enjoying herself.

"You're saying that the person who sealed up the doors with chains is the murderer, right? But as I said earlier, the person who wrapped the chains was Hoshī, so you should have thought that Hoshī is the murderer."

"You just lied, plain and simple. I asked Hoshī-san the same question when I was alone with her: 'Who was the one who sealed the doors with the chains?'. She replied that it was all you."

That was when she was checking her toes, right?

At that time, she had already discovered how the crime happened?

"Hoshī might've lied."

"It is possible, but she is not the murderer."

"Wha? You're not going to use subjective stuff like 'friendship between girls' to explain it, are you."

"The white ghost caught in the surveillance recording. **The right hand of the ghost could be seen while assassinating the victim. There was no nail polish on that hand.**"

".....Ah!"

Right, she does manicure. I didn't think she is into fashion because she doesn't have money, only her thumb was painted with nail polish, so she didn't even notice it herself until after the crime was completed. I usually don't pay attention to what kind of nail

polish a woman puts on... Had I known that things would turn out like this, I should have been prepared for this beforehand.

"The injury on the back of your head looks real. Did you hurt yourself on purpose? If so, then you are bold. You were the one who put sleeping pills in the coffee machine, right? You could've just pretended to drink the coffee and fall asleep yourself, there was no need to bruise your own head..."

Damn, an utter failure.

This technique is not that complicated at all for a detective who specializes in murder cases.

But this is good, the problems have been highlighted, and these problems will be corrected when confronting the real detective in charge— Samidare Yui.

In any case, it would be better if the info was passed on to Samidare Yui much later. And also, the info that Kirigiri has must not be given to her.

Sure enough, Kirigiri Kyōko must be killed.

"You have nothing more to say?"

She asked through the rearview mirror with eyes raised slightly looking this way, as if intentionally prodding.

Is this what a detective is?

"I have nothing more to say."

"Is that so."

Kirigiri said briefly, and once again transformed into a doll looking out the window. She was so eloquent a moment ago, but now it's almost as if her batteries have been taken out.

Tsutsumi checked the fuel gauge. No matter how many times he looks at it, it remains the same, the gas doesn't increase, but continues to decrease. Although the needle of the dial didn't move much, the gas is undoubtedly decreasing every second

What to do...

If I don't find the answer quickly, time will run out.

"I'll say it again; you can just quit the game."

Kirigiri said, as if she is riding the wave of victory.

"You should be the one quitting! What the fuck is this all about anyway? It's none of your business, why are you getting in my way! This is not something worth your life over, is it?"

Kirigiri didn't answer.

She is still looking out the window.

She isn't going to give in.

"Then let's do it this way, I promise not to harm you, but on the condition that for the remaining five days, I will detain you in a place where there is nothing. As long as that period passes smoothly, I will find a way to release you. By then, I'll be someone you don't know, and you won't be able to accuse me of anything no matter how many times you try. Listen, all you have to do is

keep quiet for five days. It's easier than trading lives right here and now, right?"

"I don't accept your offer."

She answered without hesitation.

"I actually don't want to kill anyone. 7 years ago, those twins killed my wife and made me lose everything. I just want to regain my lost self. Is this wrong? Don't force me to kill again... I beg you."

"No thanks."

She answered without hesitation again.

Neither threats nor tears are going to work.

"Why? Why do you have to be so obsessed with a case that has nothing to do with you?"

"You seem to have misunderstood. I'm not totally unrelated to you. As long as you are with the Crime Victims' Relief Committee, then you are my enemy."

"Right... Looks like you have your own reasons. Then there's no other way. Since you're not going to give in, I'll have to kill you, which is a pity."

"You have misunderstood one other thing. Don't think I can't do anything but just sit here without moving. On the contrary, I'm just waiting for your concession. There are many ways to change the current situation."

"Don't be ridiculous, brat! Didn't I tell you to fix that snobby attitude? What else can you do, try it if you can."

"Can I?"

"Yeah, go ahead."

"Before that, can you help me open the window? I keep pressing the button, but the window won't open."

"Huh? Obviously, I locked the windows. Who's going to open it for you, idiot."

"Ok then."

Through the rearview mirror, Tsutsumi saw Kirigiri's body leaning forward.

While he was wondering what she wants to do, she put her hands next to Tsutsumi's neck.

Does she want to choke my neck...

This thought came to his mind, while she pulled off the headrest of the driver's seat.

"Hey, what are you doing!"

Tsutsumi didn't even have time to stop her, the headrest next to his head is already in Kirigiri's hands. It's shaped like a giant electrical plug with two pipes attached to the pillow.

Kirigiri inserted the tip of one of the steel pipes into the gap in the door and window glass on the right side of the back seats.

Using the leverage principle by pressing the headrest down, the window glass was easily broken. The window glass of a car can never be broken by the strength of a little girl, but as long as the force is concentrated on one point, it can be broken easily.

The cold night air outside quickly flew in.

Since the speed of the car is quite high, it's like a small windstorm is blowing inside the car.

Tsutsumi's hands holding the steering wheel froze.

"Hey, little shit, what the fuck are you doing!"

"This way the balance is shifted, although I didn't have such an intention at first."

Kirigiri stuck the steel pipe of the headrest into the gap in the window glass on the other side.

"Hey, stop it!"

The second pane of glass was also broken amidst the cries to stop.

The interior of the car that was very quiet just now suddenly changed, and it's filled with the sound of the wind and of cars moving.

Next, Kirigiri took out a ballpoint pen from her uniform pocket and began to write on the surface of the headrest. The surface of the headrest happened to be white leather, and the ballpoint pen was able to write on it.

"Wh-what are you writing?"

"Your name, license plate number, car characteristics, and 'HELP'."

"Sto—"

Before Tsutsumi said a word, Kirigiri had already thrown the headrest out.

"I hope it won't cause any car accident."

Kirigiri said while starting to pull the passenger seat headrest.

This is getting out of hand!

This is terrible—

If there are any conspicuous obstacles on the highway, it's very likely that someone will report it, and someone will collect it soon after receiving the report. In this case, the info written by Kirigiri will be sent out.

"Next, writing down the general situation of the institute's case, lest I be killed."

"Okay! I lost!"

Tsutsumi finally declared his defeat.

He didn't hesitate in the slightest. Kirigiri's actions has to be stopped.

"You should have said it earlier."

Kirigiri said as she threw the headrest out of the window.

"Heyyy!"

"Can't trust a liar."

"Okay, okay, I'll let you out of the car right away and I'll turn myself in. Before that, we have to get off the highway, so be a good girl and wait, alright?"

"—Alright."

It took a long time for an answer to come.

But she accepted it.

The car drove forward for about 10 minutes, and a sign for a highway intersection appeared. This is it, he has to go there. Tsutsumi changed lanes and drove the car onto the ordinary road.

Driving through a gentle curve, the speed of the car became very slow, but Kirigiri does not seem to have any intention of jumping out of the car window.

After coming down from the highway intersection, the surrounding became a vast rural landscape. It's a beautiful place with sparkling water in summer, but now it looks like a gloomy white plain, with the dark shadows of the mountains standing close to the paddy fields like walls.

A bridge appeared ahead.

It's a big red suspension bridge.

There are cliffs on the left and right of it, it's not an exaggeration to call this place a valley.

I have to go all in.

There is still a chance of winning.

This seat has an airbag, but the back seat doesn't.

Tsutsumi stepped on the accelerator.

His body got heavily pressed on the seat.

This is the weight of death.

As long as I break through this barrier, I will have my life back.

Kirigiri started saying something loudly.

However, due to the wind coming in from the windows, I can't hear clearly what she is saying.

When he was about to drive onto the bridge, he turned the steering wheel to the right.

In the next moment, his body floated up lightly.

This means that the tires have left the ground, and the car is falling down in a parabola.

However, this floaty feeling didn't last long, and soon a strong shock hit him. The seat belt sank deeply into his shoulders and abdomen, and his vision turned snow white in an instant. It's the airbag. The car smashed against a rock, making a loud sound. The car turned into a piece of scrap iron, and under the action of gravity and nature, it fell down the cliff.

When he woke up, Tsutsumi found that the sky and earth had turned upside down.

He unfastened his seat belt, fell onto the bumpy roof cover, and crawled out of the car window. It smells of gasoline. No, maybe it's the smell of blood?

The sound of a flowing river is very close.

It seems that this is a rocky place at the bottom of the valley.

"Hey—, are you okay—?"

There is a voice from far away.

Looking over, a car headlight is shining over here, and a man with a flashlight is coming over.

"Woah, this is bad."

The man said with a flashlight shining on the broken car.

When Tsutsumi saw the scene, he felt the same way. Although the car still barely maintains its original shape, it's hard to believe that this is the cage that carried the destiny of two people just now.

"Are you hurt?"

The man asked.

"No... I think..."

Tsutsumi said, looking down at his body. Although there seems to be some minor bruises, there are no fatal injuries. Both legs are still shaking.

"Thank goodness, you're lucky, you must've used all your luck here, right? Ahaha."

"Th-the passenger in the car..."

"What did you say?"

The man shined the flashlight into the crushed car.

The two squatted down and looked inside.

Kirigiri fell on her head and her feet are on the back seat.

Although her face is pale, she doesn't seem to be bleeding.

"She's still alive, let's rescue her."

The man leaned into the car with his upper body and unfastened Kirigiri's seat belt. Kirigiri fell weakly. The man grabbed her and dragged her out.

What a nuisance...

"You help too!"

Tsutsumi had no choice but to do what he was told, moving Kirigiri from the car to a relatively flat place a little further away.

"Is she your daughter? Thank goodness, she's still breathing. You should take her to the hospital quickly."

"It's better not to move her a lot..."

"O-oh, that's right. There is a clinic near here, I'll notify the doctor there, you call an ambulance!"

"Please wait, is that your car?"

Tsutsumi pointed at the headlights of the car by the river.

"Yes what's the matter?"

"How did you get the car down?"

"There is a gravel road that leads here. I heard a loud noise, so I went down and found that there is something wrong. Is this important? Anyway, I will drive my car and notify the doctor first."

The man is intending to leave.

Tsutsumi picked up a big rock by his feet.

"Excuse me—"

He stopped the man.

"What's wrong, what els—"

As the man turned his head, Tsutsumi hit the side of his head with a stone.

The man fell down on the spot.

Did he die?

He has to die.

Tsutsumi raised the rock again, but then changed his mind.

I really hate the killing sensation on my hands, and I guess this feeling will linger after the game is over. If possible, I really hope that everything can be cleared after the game, and I hope I can truly start from scratch.

Tsutsumi grabbed the man's legs and dragged him to the river, then pushed him. The man floated in the waves and along the river, just like an insignificant piece of wood.

That's good enough.

He went back to Kirigiri.

Kirigiri is still down, with a pained expression on her face.

Tsutsumi tried to pat her on the cheek. She tried to move her face away in discomfort, but she doesn't seem to be conscious.

—'You have a chance to start your life over', huh?

Exactly.

As long as this game is won, I can start my life over.

Tsutsumi looked down at Kirigiri.

To win, she must be—

—To be continued.